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The Ludic Wars:
The Interactive Pleasures of Post-9/11 Military Video Games

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The Ludic Wars:
The Interactive Pleasures of Post-9/11 Military Video Games

by

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Dedication

for my family

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The Ludic Wars:
The Interactive Pleasures of Post-9/11 Military Video Games

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This dissertation examines how commercially successful military-themed video games produced after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks are crafted, marketed, and played with the goal of understanding the interlocking technological, cultural, and social practices that contribute to their interactive pleasures. The systematic inquiry into the production and experience of media pleasure carries with it vexing questions about how such affect is created and how it is situated within broader cultural fields. This interdisciplinary project accordingly utilizes multiple methods including close textual readings of seminal games, a critical discourse analysis of marketing materials, and an ethnography and focus group of a war gaming fan community to track how these sites of practice give post-9/11 military-themed gameplay its distinctive experiential character and cultural import. The case studies examined herein reveal that the affective dimensions of militarized gameplay are intimately linked to the political and cultural forces undergirding their production, marketing, and reception, and that the games industry mobilizes anxieties about terrorism to entice gamers into virtually striking back against foreign aggressors.

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INTRODUCTION

WELCOME TO LUDIC WAR

SPACE INVADERS AND 9/11 (OR, WHY GAMEPLAY MATTERS)

Standing side by side, the World Trade Center towers were again under aerial attack. But this time, the world-famous buildings were not in lower Manhattan. And it was not the morning hours of September 11, 2001. Most notably, the assailants this time were not international terrorists armed with hijacked passenger planes but were instead two-dimensional rows of pixilated space invaders armed with overwhelming numbers and firepower. At the 2008 Leipzig Games Convention in Germany, artist Douglas Edric Stanley's interactive installation *Invaders!* beckoned players to defend the WTC against the iconic "space invaders" co-opted from the 1978 eponymously titled arcade classic.[1] Following three days of virulent public criticism, Stanley permitted convention officials to terminate the installation (although the artist maintains the organizers did not pressure him into doing so), bringing an end to the aliens' relentless digital offensive on the twin monuments of western civilization and global capitalism.

[1] *Invaders!* had actually debuted the year before at the Laboral Art Center in Gijón, Spain, and is only the most recent iteration of a project that Stanley has been working on since the 9/11 attacks. It (and he) hadn't come under severe criticism or garnered the attention of the popular press until its short-lived exhibition in Leipzig.

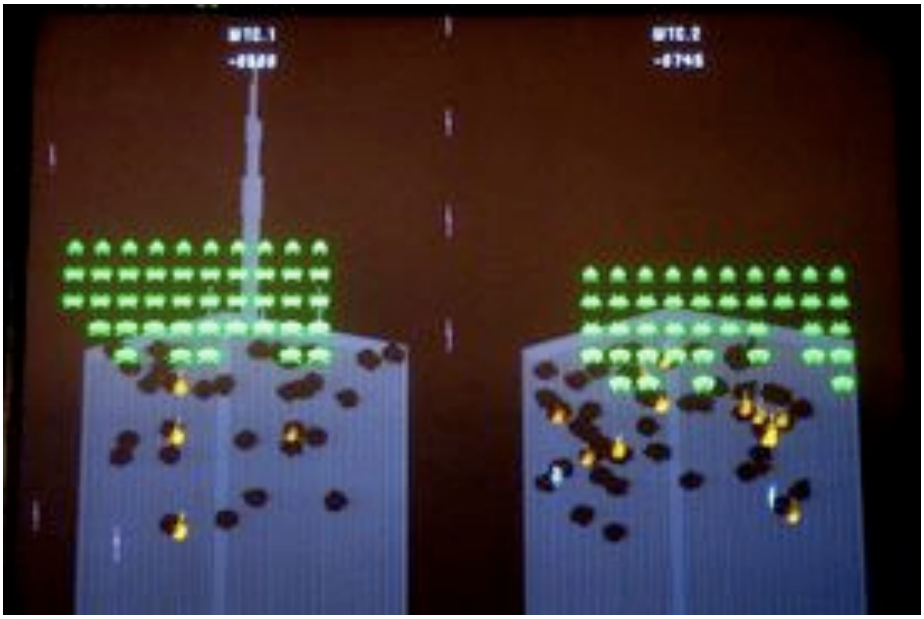

Figure 0.1: The WTC is under alien attack in Stanley's art piece, *Invaders!*[2]

This book critically examines military-themed "shooter" video games produced during the first decade of the twentieth-first century with the goal of understanding the technological, cultural, and social factors that contribute to these games' pleasurable gameplay experiences. The systematic inquiry into the production of media pleasure carries with it vexing questions about how such affect is engineered and how it is situated within broader cultural fields. One reason why the *Invaders!* art piece – which will be examined in greater detail later this chapter – is emotionally jarring is because it only *seemingly* provides the opportunity of saving the Twin Towers. Stanley's "game," if it can be rightly called such, cannot be won; there is no way to save the landmarks from the descending alien horde. In lieu of offering escapist fun, the exhibition critiques the

[2] From: http://cache.kotaku.com/assets/images/kotaku/2008/08/originalspace_01.jpg

mediated pleasures that commercial military-themed video games trade in. This book assumes a less polemical but no less a critical tack when it interrogates: these games' depiction of the U.S.'s war policies and national imaginary; the marketing strategies used to sell these controversial titles during a time of international conflict; and how avid gamers play with and against one another on these virtual battlefields. The topics of video game design, marketing, and reception are examined together because these practices give video gameplay – or the mediated experience of playing through an electronic game – its distinctive experiential character and cultural import.[3] This book treats gameplay seriously because the driving research presumption – which is evident in Stanley's provocative artwork, just as it is in the everyday play practices of millions of gamers – is simple: gameplay matters.

Video gameplay matters because these mediated experiences give us the freedom and license to experiment with future possibilities and potential states of being in near-real scenarios and in wholly fictional settings and abstracted spaces. One can imagine the amateur pilot honing her flying skills during a lunch break on *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* (2006); the elementary student in an afterschool computer program risking his frontier party's health as he pushes west without enough supplies in *The Oregon Trail* (1985);

[3] I have elected to use the compound word "gameplay" instead of the separated "game play" partly because that is how it commonly appears in industry and journalistic publications. I also prefer the former construction because it suggests that the mediated experience is the fusion of the gaming device and the gamer playing it. As digital culture scholar Sherry Turkle (1984) observes, games cannot wield their experiential "holding power" if one does not actually play the game. Moreover, there "is no game without a player" (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005, p. 1), and thus no game without play.

and the football fan replaying a critical scoring drive in a classic playoff matchup in *Madden 10* (2009).

But gamers exercise choice and agency as fantastic characters in imaginary realms as well. Every day, motley bands of explorers attempt different raiding strategies in the massively, multiplayer online game, *World of Warcraft* (2004). At the local strip mall, the classic game enthusiast feeds quarter after quarter into the *Ms. Pac-Man* (1981) arcade cabinet, struggling to beat her previous high score and the game's four multi-colored ghosts – Inky, Blinky, Pinky, and Sue. And playing from living rooms time zones apart, eight friends furiously lay waste to one another in the sci-fi, first-person shooter, *Halo 3* (2007). Irrespective of its fictional or factual content, video games and gameplay matter because they grant players opportunities to make meaningful choices alone and together in virtual worlds that operate according to unique rule sets.

Yet gameplay experiences are not determined exclusively by in-game prompts and cues. Gameplay is likewise colored by all those practices that precede and surround these human-game interactions. For instance, the professional development activities that crafted the gaming artifact (i.e., its production history), those discursive and rhetorical practices that determine its place in the public consciousness (e.g., advertising campaigns), as well as the social norms dictating how games ought to be taken up by players (e.g., issues of fandom and media reception) all "play" a part in determining how a game should be played and, as importantly, *why* it might be enjoyed. When thinking about what makes a game pleasurable – with all of the subjective messiness that that

entails – it is necessary to unpack the gaming artifact while situating it within its broader industrial, cultural, and play contexts.

If gameplay matters for electronic games, then it certainly matters in the case of military-themed video games. War games engage issues ranging from militarism, to terrorism and torture, to the efficacy of preemptive military interventions. Moreover, there is no sub-grouping or genre of games that more vividly and viscerally explores the political and cultural values central to the U.S.'s national imaginary in the new century than the "military shooter" games produced after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Finally, video gameplay matters because the matters of gameplay are not restricted to individual play sessions. Virtual game worlds and the physical world exist in a co-evolving dialectic. If we are to understand what makes playing war fun – i.e., how ludic war culture operates generally – then we must understand how such pleasures are created by forces inside and outside of these war-torn gamespaces. By examining the complementary practices that make these games commercial successes, we can discern what gives these games such widespread cultural popularity and why they resonate so powerfully with players during the early years of the twenty-first century.

TAKING AIM AT THE "MILITARY SHOOTER"

This book makes the argument throughout that game culture is the emergent and fluctuating result of overlapping processes of production, marketing, and play. A player's gameplay experiences are shaped by the titles they play (i.e., specific gaming text), and when, where, and how they play them (i.e., their historical location and the terms of their social engagement). Given these textual variables and situational

contingencies, gameplay experiences are not qualitatively equivalent events. This fact also holds for war games. The focus of this project is on commercially successful military "shooter" games played from first- and third-person perspectives that immerse gamers in virtual firefights. "Shooter" is a term of convenience, adopted from game industry discourse. It is not without its shortcomings, however.

The admittedly loose "military-themed" and "military shooter" descriptors, which have been invoked thus far and which will continue to be used, illustrate the definitional challenges of categorizing a diverse set of media texts that change over time. Military-themed, for instance, is used to distinguish between games that represent real or near-real conflicts (past, present, or future) from wholly fantastic genres like science fiction or survival horror. In the former, the player must eliminate human threats on behalf of one's country. In the latter, the gamer must eliminate monstrous, or alien threats in a patently fictional world, even if that world is an overtly militarized one: consider the space marines in the sci-fi shooters *Doom* (1993), *Halo* (2001), and *Gears of War* (2006), or the special operations team that combats super-natural threats in the survival horror game, *F.E.A.R.* (2006). These are not mere cosmetic distinctions. Rather, these differences represent meaningful issues of media modality that determine how games are understood as relating to the real world or not (a point that is taken up in Chapter One, and which informs the project's handling of gameplay pleasure).

The military-themed and shooter labels do not, however, denote additional aesthetic differences. Neither label is a rigid generic category. Even the games that are scrutinized in the following chapters illustrate the taxonomical difficulties posed by the

multiplicity of gaming technologies and gameplay mechanics of military titles crafted in a contemporary, realist aesthetic. For instance, the Tom Clancy-brand titles (some of which are examined in Chapter Three) encompass a diversity of game styles including stealth action (*Splinter Cell: Conviction* [2009]), squad-based shooters (*Rainbow Six: Vegas* [2006]), real-time strategy (*Endwar* [2008]), and aerial combat (H.A.W.X. [2009]). Furthermore, military shooters are often produced for a variety of hardware with diverging technological demands. One can play *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (examined in Chapter Two) on the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 consoles, on a PC or Mac, and on mobile devices such as the Nintendo DS and mobile phones. Not surprisingly, the *Call of Duty* experience varies considerably across these platforms. And "realistic" military-themed games often represent conflicts across time, from ancient battles (*Rome: Total War* [2004]), to current conflicts (*Kuma\War* [2004]), and near-future warfare (*Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* [2006]).

Finally, military-themed shooters are not necessarily "military brand" games.[4] The government takes a central and public role in the production of its military brand games since these titles carry their imprimatur and are often used for recruitment or training purposes (e.g., *America's Army* [2002], *Full Spectrum Warrior* [2004]). Posed differently: all military brand games are military-themed games, but not all military-themed games are military brand games. And while the U.S. military benefits considerably from having complementary depictions of its fighting men and women on computer and television screens, the American government sanctions few military-

[4] See Payne (2009b) for an examination of Defense Department-produced games.

themed games, a fact that holds true for most world governments. Far more often game studios hire military subject matter experts to advise them on tactics, protocols, and battlefield behaviors so their games possess sufficient detail to engender an authentic military experience without having to submit their design choices to the scrutiny of the Defense Department's exacting review process (see, Chapter Four).

A variety of combat games, powered by technologies young and old, located in disparate play sites, concerning real and fictional conflicts across human history can generate any number of pleasurable virtual war experiences – something I am calling the *ludic war* experience. Ludic war's experiential variability is a conceptual strength and a weakness. The sheer diversity of games that deal with realistic or near-realistic war scenarios and the number of gaming platforms that have facilitated virtual, commercially-available combat since the 1970s underscore a guiding premise of this book: namely, if we want to understand what video games and their gameplay pleasures *mean* at any one moment, we must read them critically as texts, understand their marketing ephemera, and make sense of their play sites. One can easily imagine how feeding quarters into an arcade version of the Cold War-inspired city defense game *Missile Command* (1980) is a different experience from play-training with soldiers on the modified *Marine Doom* on networked computers in Quantico, Virginia during the mid-1990s. And these strategic firefights are not the same battles taking place on home consoles as friends lay waste to one another via high-speed Internet connections in *Modern Warfare 2* (2009).

The question of what constitutes a military-themed "shooter" game is a consequential one because, as a practical research matter, it determines the titles that will

be examined from those that will not. Such definitional wrangling likewise reminds us that military gaming events and experiences enjoy their own historically distinct resonances. The pleasures of playing post-9/11 military shooters are commensurate with and differ in consequential ways from previous war games' pleasures (see, Chapter One). Having a clearer idea of the kinds of games that will be examined, this book moves toward posing tougher questions about the cultural import of everyday gaming practices, questions like, how are ludic pleasures produced; what do these pleasures say about the political anxieties of a nation at war; and how and why do gamers wage virtual war?

STUDYING MILITAINMENT'S LUDIC IMAGINARY

Media entertainment concerning the U.S. military's conflicts and interventions – both fictional and historical – must be viewed in light of how such texts shape the popular imaginary about the world's mightiest military force, and the nation and citizenry it protects. Nationalism scholar Benedict Anderson (1991) reminds us that the stories we tell one another about our nations and their intertwined histories shape how we view our place in the world and the constituency of our national and shared "imagined communities." According to Anderson, a nation is necessarily imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1991, p. 6). Cultural historians and theorists like Anderson pay particular attention to the power of narrating a national history, and the manifold ways that social technologies and media calcify ideas of the nation (1991, Chapter 10).

A nation's collective identity and its mythological destiny find powerful expression across numerous media, old and new. Commenting on the ontological power of the moving image's single-frame ancestor, Anderson remarks:

> The photograph, fine child of the age of mechanical reproduction, is only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence (birth certificates, diaries, report cards, letters, medical records, and the like) which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from memory. Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, *identity* (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it can not be "remembered" must be narrated. (emphasis in original, 1991, p. 204)

Photographs, films, radio programs, documentary series, web sites, and – yes – video games are the disparate forensic evidence and cultural building blocks for our collective national memory. And these shared stories about the nation, be they true or not, unify groups of people across vast distances and eras (Smith, 2001, p. 60). The culture industries' twentieth and twenty-first century entertainments are especially powerful vessels for communicating a national identity because they tell us what is worth commemorating, and they give us opportunities for empathizing with others' sacrifices on behalf of the state (a point I take up in Chapter Two). Cultural historian George Lipsitz (1990) observes:

> Time, history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic mass communication is possible. Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection. (p. 5)

As manifestly constructed as entertainment commodities about military endeavors are – be they depicted on cinema's flickering celluloid, TV's interlaced fields, comic books'

paper panels, or in video games' electronic code – they explain how men and women should understand war and conflict, and why they should ever sacrifice themselves for fellow citizens who they can only hope to imagine. They are, in effect, a form of secular mythology of the state that shape the public consciousness about matters which few Americans experience directly. Critical political economist Vincent Mosco (2004) reminds us of the credibility and persuasive powers that popular myths wield, stating:

> …myths are not just a distortion of the reality that requires debunking; they are a form of reality. They give meaning to life, particularly by helping us to understand the seemingly incomprehensible, to cope with the problems that are overwhelmingly intractable, and to create in vision or dream what cannot be realized in practice. (pp. 13-14)

But while military entertainments, or "militainments," may perpetuate nationalistic fantasies, they differ with how they convey and deliver their myths.

As the nexus of state power and commercial entertainment, militainment provides critics with valuable insights into contemporary attitudes about war, how popular culture envisions what martial power looks and feels like, and the processes by which defense firms and entertainment interests create their collaborative works. Roger Stahl (2010) defines this neologism as, "…state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption. Beyond this, the word also suggests that this state violence is not of the abstract, distant, or historical variety but rather an impending or current use of force, one directly relevant to the citizen's current political life" (p. 6). The various instantiations of militainment (e.g., sports, reality TV, video games, and toys), according to Stahl, transform the citizen-soldier into the citizen-spectator – from a citizenry that gains its political legitimacy from national service and sacrifice, to one that gains legitimacy

through the consumption of war spectacle. But this is not the whole picture either; or, at the very least, it is *less* the case during the early twenty-first century.

Stahl argues that we are transitioning from an epoch of war spectatorship to one of interactive war where the citizen-spectator is giving way to the "virtual citizen-soldier" who actively engages in the co-production of interactive conflict. He observes:

> [Spectacle and interactive war] feature distinct pleasures. The spectacle offers those of distraction, bedazzlement, and voyeurism, pleasures driven by a kind of alienated looking. In contrast, the pleasures of the interactive war are predicated on participatory play, not simply watching the machine in motion but wiring oneself into a fantasy of a first-person, authorial kinetics of war. (2010, p. 42)

And herein lies the greatest insight of Stahl's critique for this project: rather than deactivating and depoliticizing the citizen through distraction (i.e., conceiving of militainment as media spectacle that distances the citizen from the state), interactive war engages the citizen-consumer by creating play opportunities that absorbs the "citizen identity into the military-entertainment matrix" (2010, p. 16). This is not the top-down power of war spectacle which is thought to overwhelm viewers, but is instead a series of personalized interpellations that hail citizens to action, imbricating these war players in the varied processes of militainment. Stahl makes his case by examining militainment's breadth of expression across a diverse set of contemporary media formats and artifacts, including news programming, sporting events, video games, and toys.

In a similar philosophical and methodological vein, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) posit that vdieo games are a crystallization of Empire (specifically, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's formulation [2000]), and that this paradigmatic media form offers the most powerful articulation of the reigning techno-

capitalist logic even as it carries with it opportunities for escape and the reimagining our social arrangements. The authors note:

> Just as the eighteenth-century novel was a textual apparatus generating the bourgeois personality required by mercantile colonialism (but also capable of criticizing it), and just as twentieth-century cinema and television were integral to industrial consumerism (yet screened some of its darkest depictions), so virtual games are media constitutive of twenty-first-century global hypercapitalism and, perhaps, also of lines of exodus from it. (2009, p. xxix)

Like Stahl, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter see video war games as occupying one critical node of Empire's cultural and economic logic. And as paradigmatic as they are, war games are but one singular piece in these scholars' larger arguments. This project does not contest these emphases but uses their analyses as a jumping off point. I wish to extend these superlative analyses by examining in greater detail how game design choices, advertising campaigns, and gameplay communities all contribute to the creation of a ludic war culture that brings the hegemonically pleasurable "virtual citizen-soldier" subject position into being (a subject position I call the "ludic soldier"), and why – more than any other piece of war media – the military shooter can claim its rightful place as the apotheosis of post-9/11 militainment.

Although this project focuses on the military shooter, ludic war culture is not necessarily coterminous with any specific genre or subgenre of combat games (e.g., first-person shooter, flight simulator, real-time or turn-based strategy), or gaming platform (e.g., console, PC, or mobile) for all the slippery reasons listed earlier. Rather, this project views commercial gaming culture as *an interconnected techno-cultural field of social practices structured around video gameplay interactions in and out of mediated*

gamespaces. The social meanings and pleasures of video games are never dictated solely by users' interactions with these "algorithmic cultural objects" – to borrow Alexander Galloway's (2006, p. 6) nifty phrase – but are likewise shaped by elements and forces extrinsic to games' programming code and mechanics.

Like the gameplay pleasures, the competencies developed during the gamers' intense play sessions are not limited to those digital worlds. As I explore in this book's later chapters, the processes of gameplay generate techno-cultural capital that gamers then use to mark themselves as experts within their communities of play. Instead of standing apart from society in isolation, the oft-lauded experiential remove – i.e., the the magic circle – of video gaming is, in fact, inextricably connected to extant social forces (political, economic, cultural, etc.) and gamers' understanding of their non-gaming pursuits. Ludic war culture is thus but one techno-cultural formation of commercial and leisure practices embedded within a larger system of late capitalism and commercial war play (i.e., see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter [2009], and Stahl [2010], respectively), but one that possesses medium-specific pleasures and practices that marks it as a unique leisure activity.

This project's initial research question is a fairly mechanistic one: how do commercially successful military shooters produced in the West after the 9/11 attacks engender pleasure for gamers? To answer this question I examine the interlocking practices that come to bear on, and constitute the social fabric of, what this book is calling *ludic war* culture. The more challenging questions that follow – and which I arrive at in the Conclusion – are: what does this ludic war play mean for our

understanding of U.S. and its citizenry in the early twenty-first century, and how does this war play reconfigure our shared ludic imaginary? We know that the simulated wars are nothing like actual battles, and that the ludic mythology propagated in these interactive wars is categorically not reality. But this obvious and tired observation misses a bigger point – a point that the systematic inquiry into media pleasure hopes to answer. As Mosco (2004) notes, myth is "a political term that inflects human value with ideology" and "the accuracy of a myth is not its major test. Rather, myths sustain themselves when they are embraced by power" (p. 39). Let us begin working towards answering these questions of pleasure and social power by first defining the project's titular concept.

INTRODUCING LUDIC WAR

Invaders!'s decidedly mixed reception usefully illustrates a convergence of topics of perennial interest to media studies: representation, technology, remediation, play, pleasure, interactivity, and power. Indeed, shooters are rich objects of study for those interested in understanding this nexus of media technologies, militarism, politics, and economic power because these cultural artifacts fuse the conventions of moving image war entertainment with computational algorithms to produce interactive combat play experiences, i.e. *ludic war*.

This book defines ludic war as *the pleasurable experience of playing war or military-themed video games alone or with others*. Ludic war (or ludic warring) is a better term for my purposes than the typical wargame (or its verb, wargaming) for several reasons. First, the word "ludic" (derived from the Latin "ludus" meaning game or play)

emphasizes the foundational play activity of the player-game relationship, as well as the liminal and bifurcated quality of the mediated gameplay experience (i.e., a gamer's actions and experiences unfold concurrently in both off- and on-screen worlds; play is and is not what it purports to be). Or, as narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) observes, "…while one body slays dragons, flirts with a used-car salesman who poses as a hooker, or explores an enchanted forest, the other one types on a keyboard or squeezes a joystick" (p. 307).[5]

The term ludic also carries connotations of fun, which alludes to the pleasurable dimensions of video gameplay, and connects the experience with – as Sherry Turkle (1984) notes – our increasingly broader culture of simulation. This is why, despite its combat-oriented content, the purposeful production of displeasure in *Invaders!* and similar "countergames"[6] disqualifies them from contributing to a true ludic war experience (although they certainly contribute to a critique of that experience).

Finally, I am opting to use ludus, or the rule-based notion of play, and not "paidia," the unbounded and frolicsome idea of play, because the experience of playing digital war games is at all times mediated by some rule structure (even if said rules are

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[5] Ryan defines a "successful game" broadly as, "a global design that warrants an active and pleasurable participation of the player in the game-world – the term world being taken here not as the sum of imagined objects but in a non-figurative sense, as the delimited space and time in which the game takes place" (2001, p. 181).

[6] See, Alexander Galloway (2006, Chapter 5) for an examination of countergames and countergaming, which can engender intellectual responses by drawing players' attention to media form and showcasing computational artifice. Galloway analogizes the formal difference between games and countergame, in part, to the split between classical Hollywood filmmaking with its continuity editing that hides artifice, and experimental films that destroy cinematic illusions by drawing attention to the filmmaking apparatus.

fairly open-ended).[7] Rules delimit the game's actionable field (i.e., rules solicit and prohibit actions), and shape the "possibility space," engendering subsequent pleasures and/or frustrations.[8] Ludic war play is, thus, the player's exploration of a title's affecting rules of combat, its possibility spaces, and its nationalistic narratives.

Ludic war owes its conceptual genesis to two markedly different works. The first is game scholar Jesper Juul's (2005) thesis that video games enjoy a "half-real" status because they engender an experiential liminality that combines real game rules with a fictional game universe. Truly engrossing games, according to Juul, are those where the fictional diegesis effaces the game's operational rules. Fictional, in this case, does not mean that games only represent unreal or fantastic topics or genres (e.g., fantasy, science-fiction), but that the game experience is itself a manufactured fiction (not unlike Mosco's definition of mythology). In fact, many players find video games to be compelling and pleasurable, including the combat-oriented titles examined herein, precisely because they replicate historical facts, use photo-realistic imagery, and model physical processes.

Ludic war's other inspirational building block is Robin Luckham's (1984) notion of "armament culture." According to Luckham, this cultural complex is based "on the fetishism of the advanced weapons system" and it "arises out of interlinked developments in advanced capitalism, the state and the modern war system" (p. 1). Weapon systems, which Luckham defines broadly, are not merely represented in or by popular culture, but

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[7] French philosopher and influential play theorist Roger Caillois (2001) makes the important distinction in his work between "ludus" and "paidia," which he positions at opposite poles of the play spectrum.

[8] Ian Bogost (2007, p. 43) describes a game's "possibility space" as that which we explore when interacting with a game's controls and its rules.

are imbricated in all manner of cultural production – as product *and* as producer. Armament culture is rightly thought of as an ideological apparatus that not only interpellates consumers as sympathetic comrades-in-arms, but transforms civilians into "passive targets" that "stress their isolation and powerlessness" (p. 4).

If the idea of armament culture rings familiar, it is because Luckham's concept predates the more fashionable "military-entertainment complex" critique that gained traction in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This latter economic and cultural matrix (which enjoys no shortage of hyphenated titles) describes the web of associations – technological, aesthetic, ideological, human resources, etc. – connecting defense interests with entertainment firms. For a brief synopsis of these cognate conceptualizations, see Appendix A; and for a brief production history on early video games' place in this production web, see the Introduction to my co-edited collection *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (2009).

I want to return briefly to a shortcoming in Luckham's argument, but not one that is limited to his critique. The author oversells armament culture's power in assuming an unproblematic (and, indeed, unsubstantiated) automatic ideology transfer from military text to media user: "Armament culture lulls [consumers] into accepting their status as passive targets of weapons. And their subordination is reinforced by ideologies that stress their isolation and powerlessness" (p. 4). I am reticent to accept this claim since scholars have largely jettisoned this version of false consciousness – the idea of the wholly passive media consumer – and any related "hypodermic needle" model of media reception. Luckham's deterministic framing also presumes an ideological uniformity on

the textual front as well. Video games, even popular military shooters, rarely suggest singular readings. Indeed, countergames (to be discussed shortly) are perhaps the clearest evidence of designers' and players' skepticism of the commercial imperatives and ideological presumptions of armament culture. It is far more likely that because video gameplay is a recreational experience engaged primarily in leisure contexts, that it operates hegemonically and not strictly ideologically (Gramsci, 1971).

Luckham's otherwise adept analysis errs in granting too much power to militainment to penetrate and colonize users' minds, and not nearly enough to consumers' disparate use practices. It is my hope that by moving away from the militainment-as-spectacle model and by focusing instead on militainment-as-play (involving the disparate practices of players, designers, and marketers), we can arrive at a more nuanced view of how interactive war creates, in the words of technology and communication scholars Les Levidow and Kevin Robins (1989), its own "attractions as well as their horrors" (p. 176). Despite its problematic determinism, Luckham's "armament culture" remains a generative concept because it enables us to consider how cultural goods and leisure pursuits can conform to a military logic even when there are no strong ties linking entertainment products with government or defense firms, or when such entertainment activities do not unfold within militarized spaces.

Ludic war combines rule-dependent video gameplay with armament culture's politically charged symbolic regime. The analytical utility of ludic war is that it acknowledges the active production of a shared and emergent fiction by gamers, while simultaneously recognizing that extant institutions, such as the cultural industries and

defense interests, wield considerable force in circulating ideologically-rich messages and values in contemporary society. The ludic war experience is hence a co-creation of gamer and game, of user and of media text. But this is not the whole picture either.

Ludic wars are played in real-world spaces, and in specific techno-social configurations. In fact, video gameplay – military-themed or otherwise – rarely unfolds in identical social settings. Video gaming's varied play arenas (e.g., work, home, arcade, etc.) also demand appropriate recognition and contextualization in any comprehensive cultural critique. The *where* (i.e., social setting) and the *how* (i.e., social relations and technologies) must be considered alongside the *what* (i.e., textual gameplay), as well as its connection to any culturally dominant symbolic regimes (i.e., armament culture, in this case) which are themselves located within particular modes of cultural production.

For these reasons it becomes necessary to situate ludic war play in its social setting, while also parsing the development discourses and marketing efforts around top-selling games. Expanding the analysis beyond the games proper discloses how the video game's experiential "magic circle" is co-produced by gamers and marketing professionals plying their trade. This project examines the manifold pleasures of ludic war by attending to the texts, reception, and marketing efforts of military shooters because this tripartite juncture of forces creates an affective experience that makes playing virtual war fun, and showcases the manifold ways in which ludic warring – borne of the military-entertainment complex, armament culture, or whatever heading one ultimately backs – reconfigures citizens' relationship to the state and the wielding of its military power.

STUDYING LUDIC WAR PLEASURES

To best examine how military shooters and their attendant social practices engender interactive pleasures, this project studies ludic war's instantiation across three media categories – text, paratext, and context – for top-selling franchises produced during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The following chapters analyze game design choices (text), marketing efforts (paratext), and how war play unfolds at a computer gaming center (context). Viewed *in toto*, these separate case studies reveal how gaming pleasure is broadly produced through a range of complementary and mutually reinforcing practices along textual, paratextual, and contextual fronts. One might imagine the ludic war experience at the center of a Venn diagram depicting these categories of practice.

Figure 0.2: Interacting circuits of ludic war culture

It bears noting that these interlocking groupings do not represent wholly discrete aspects of media culture; rather, the tripartite concept is a generative heuristic for thinking about how diverse practices coalesce to create historically specific gaming pleasures.

Thinking of military gaming culture in terms of converging social practices draws broadly on the media convergence literature (e.g., Gray [2009], Jenkins [2006], Marshall [2004], and Ruggill [2009]) and media studies research that re-conceptualizes and reframes media interactions as meaning-making activities that extend beyond theater, television, and computer screens (see, Bird [2003] Cauldry [2004]; Wilson [2009]). The current project is particularly in debt to the "circuitry of interactivity" concept introduced by Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter in their excellent *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (2003). The scholars' "circuitry of interactivity" schema fuses a critical political economic understanding of market forces and institutional history with cultural studies' insights about audiences' interpretive abilities to present a holistic framework for thinking about how gaming culture comes into being.

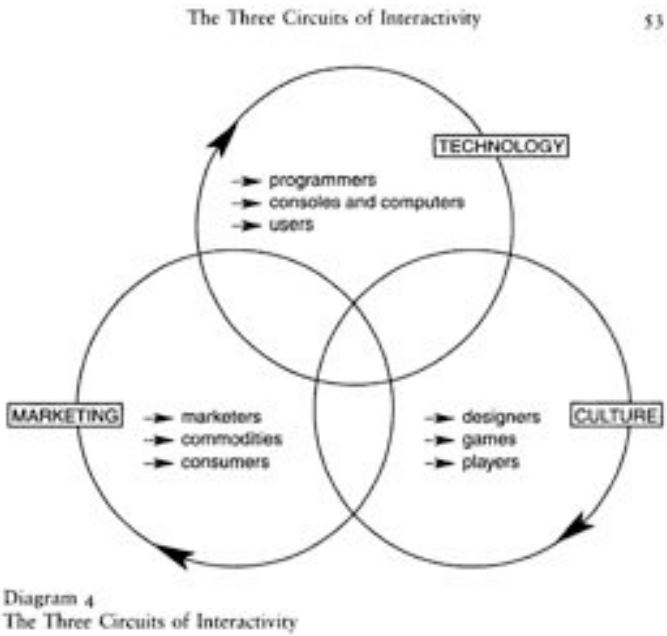

Figure 0.3: Kline et al.'s "Circuitry of Interactivity" (2003)

Their work resembles previous efforts that have attempted to account for economic and cultural forces (e.g., du Gay et al. below [Fig. 0.4]), despite the challenges inherent in bringing together cultural studies and political economic approaches that may have differing epistemological foundations and critical commitments.[9]

[9] Of course, raising this point risks reproducing the false dilemma that has long plagued media studies. See Hesmondhalgh (2002) for more on this divisive history and attempts to circumvent it.

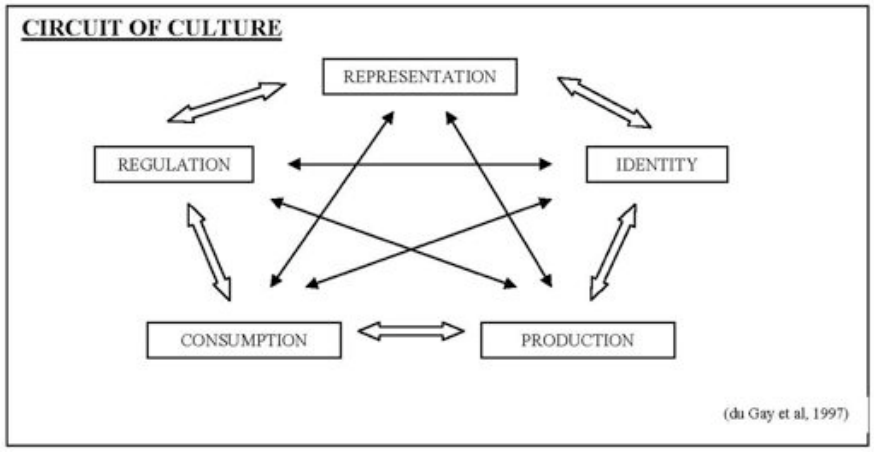

Figure 0.4: du Gay et al.'s similar "Circuit of Culture" (1997)[10]

Reimagining these holistic schemas for the study of gaming culture is neither intended to enter into the long-standing debate between these camps, nor is it about privileging one approach over another. Rather, these efforts are cited as evidence of the desire to overcome these divides by explaining how an appreciation of texuality in concert with economic, industrial, and cultural forces all bear on users' mediated pleasures.

In the realm of game studies, video game scholar Michael Nitsche (2008) proposes a comprehensive schema for assessing how gaming's multiple planes of interaction inform how games are experienced as space.

[10] Image from: http://www.users.muohio.edu/wilmsce/circuit_culture.jpg

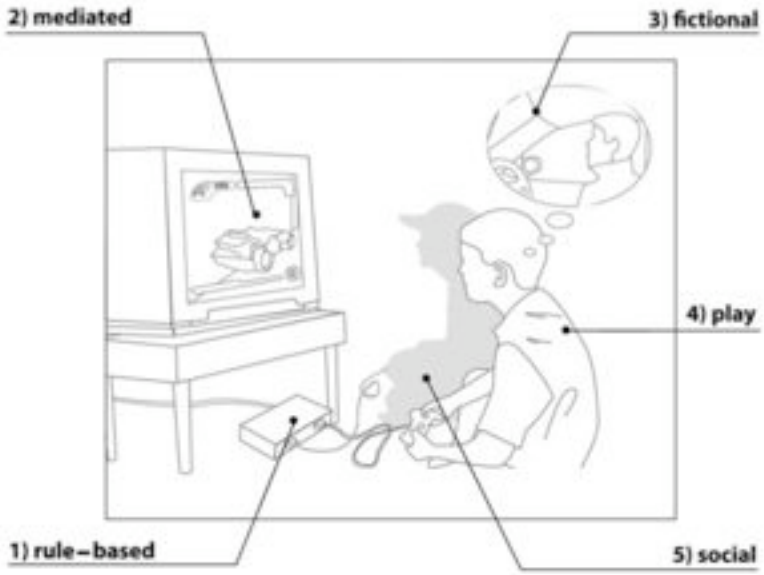

Figure 0.5: Nitsche's Five Analytical Planes of Gaming Space (2008, p.15)

Nitsche states of his approach: "None of these layers alone is enough to support a rich game world. That is why the argument will concentrate not on a separation between these layers but on their interconnections and overlaps to understand how they work in combination" (2008, p. 17). Similarly, the current investigation sees the interactive pleasures of military gaming as a consequence of engaging with commercialized ludic war culture inside *and* outside of military shooters. The circuitry of ludic war's interactive pleasures can be mapped over Nitsche's spatial schema as follows (Fig. 0.6).

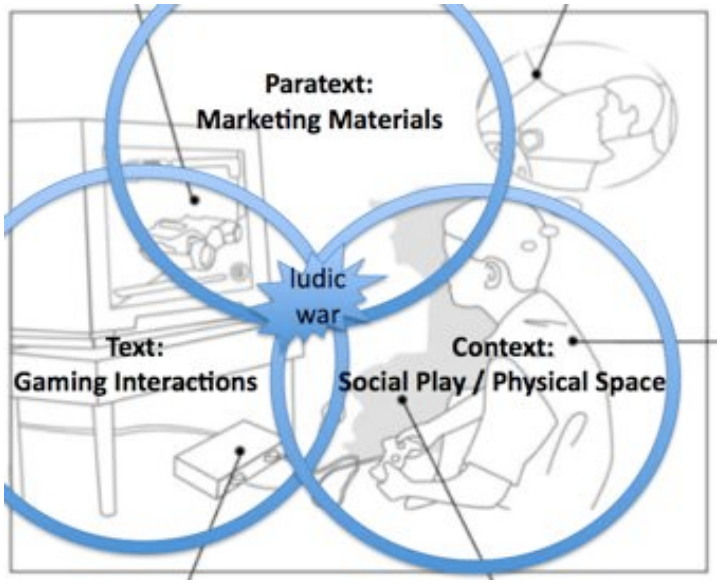

Figure 0.6: The Techno-Cultural Circuitry of Ludic War

In *9/11 Culture*, Jeffery Melnick asserts that, "9/11 is a language. It has its own vocabulary, grammar, and tonalities" (2009, p. 6). The attacks of that day – understood broadly as the tragedy's discursive legacy, its psychic trauma, and innumerable media representations – have since concretized as a distinct cultural formation. Following the lead of cultural studies, Melnick defines a cultural formation as "a site where important social and political institutions, rhetorical practices, and personal behaviors overlap and combine to create a threshold level of cultural energy that comes to define its historical moment in some significant manner" (2009, p. 6). If 9/11 is a cultural formation, then the post-9/11 military shooter represents a ludic or gamic articulation of that formation. These video games not only present researchers with novel artifacts for examining how 9/11 is commemorated and repackaged for sale; they likewise evidence how war games have transmogrified the horrific events of that day into pleasurable opportunities for play.

CONVERGENCES AS PRACTICES & PRACTICES AS PLAY

To unwind and unpack the interactive pleasures of ludic war culture is, in effect, to enter into longstanding debates about the contours of media convergence. Journalists, bloggers, and media scholars have published a spate of columns, web posts, articles, and books throughout the 1990s and 2000s chronicling new media convergence, or how the mass digitization of media content and the increased connectivity, interoperability, and mobility of information and communication technologies continue to reshape global mediascapes. Although a certain amount of technologically determinist language pervades trade press accounts (and to a lesser degree some academic reflections) about the generational upgrades in media convergence, the critical scholarship largely underscores the need for establishing the historical context for talking about the uses of media technologies, dispelling determinist discourses that equate hardware and software upgrades with inevitable social change (both the Utopianist and moral panic varieties), and expanding the technology-centered definition of media convergence to encompass interpersonal and cultural agents.[11]

A key proponent of this redefinition is public intellectual and media scholar Henry Jenkins. In his popular *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), Jenkins remarks: "Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal

[11] Competent introductory collections of twentieth and early twentieth-first century media convergence include: Caldwell and Everett's *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*; Kackman et al.'s *Flow TV: Television in an Age of Convergence*; Harries' *The New Media Book*; Spigel and Olsson's *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*; and Staiger and Hake's *Convergence Media History*.

mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we makes sense of our everyday lives" (pp. 3-4). As global a phenomenon as it is, media convergence remains a personal and quotidian event that is difficult to pin down because it represents, at any one time, a dynamic, emergent, and momentary nexus of forces and social acts; media convergence "refers to a process, not an endpoint" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 16). Ludic war culture likewise represents a state of techno-social affairs at a given moment (I return to this point next chapter when I compare two popular video war games from different gaming eras).

Jenkins rightly highlights social interactions as the key, driving force behind convergence culture's emergent processes of being. Other scholars have made similar arguments that critical media analyses need not begin or end with the media text or with the culture industries' structural economies. Instead, this third group of scholars contend that media ought to be theorized as practice. Nick Couldry's (2004) practice-based research (taking cues from the sociology of knowledge tradition) is one such means of avoiding the tendency in media studies to reproduce the either/or cultural studies versus political economy dichotomy (again, see Hesmondhalgh, 2002, for a good summation of this reductive but pervasive division). Instead, Couldry "starts not with media texts or media institutions, but with practice – not necessarily the practice of audiences, but media-oriented practice, in all its looseness and openness. What, quite simply, are people *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?" (emphasis in original, 2004, p. 119). Or, reframed for the current project, the question becomes: what social practices bring ludic war culture into being? The book's triangulated case study

design answers this question by focusing attention on how the computational actions of gaming texts, the marketing efforts of advertising paratexts, and the social environments of gaming contexts engender converging user pleasures that represent complementary interactions between the varied agents and elements of a post-9/11 military gaming culture. Studying what ludic war *means* demands studying what it is people *do* when they interact with war games; or, as Couldry notes, "we need the perspective of practice to help us address how media are embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life" (2004, p. 129).

Bridging the study of social practice and gameplay is Antoni Roig et al.'s (2009) examination of play's centrality in the gaming experience. Like Nick Couldry and Henry Jenkins, Antoni Roig et al. argue the need to understand game interactions as media practice because such a move "would imply not only attending to video game consumption (or the practice of playing games), but also to how the gaming practice is related to other media practices and how it is socially organized" (p. 91). Understanding video games as practice has at least three implications for researchers: first, it "allows locating video games in the context of other practices related to the cultural industries and media consumption"; second, games can be understood as their own media activity that is "characterized by hybridizing audiovisual representational practices and game cultures"; and third, games should be situated with respect to larger social actions and formations for players and non-players alike (Roig et al., 2009, p. 100). Understanding games as media practice highlights the processes by which gamers construct their play communities (a point I take up in Chapter Five), and the manner in which their social

worlds (with their values, norms, and representations) are reproduced and have impacts that extend beyond a single gaming community.

I need to briefly contest one of Roig et al.'s final points. The authors contend that media practice means scrutinizing what people do with games instead of pursuing textual readings of the games proper. They note: "we must analyze public observable activities instead of searching for meanings 'in the text' or in the video game as an object itself" (p. 101). This is an over-correction that results in two problems: first, it unnecessarily limits the definitional parameters of media practice; and second, it forecloses the critic's ability to make knowledge claims based on their gameplay experiences. To the first point, if gameplay falls under the definitional umbrella of media practice, why cannot the game researcher's own play activities be the subject of reflection? There is a rich tradition of close textual analyses in media studies, and auto-ethnographic projects in anthropology and sociology. There is no compelling reason why game researchers should be prohibited from reporting on their own gaming experiences provided that it is reported as such. And to the second point, the critical analysis of gaming ideology and the hegemonic pleasures of gameplay structures, narratives, marketing ephemera, et cetera, demands a critic who has been trained to assess those elements. It is unreasonable to expect most gamers to include such criticism in their gameplay reports, or that these points will emerge from the study of "public observable activities." Media practices should not mean setting aside the textual meanings of games. Rather, the point of focusing on media practices *writ large* is to emphasize how similar and disparate activities by a host of actors and social forces produce varied states of play. Because the

gaming apparatus' textual machinery demands inputs to produce outputs, the critical analyst *must* be free to analyze his or her own gameplay as well as the practices of others.

THE TROUBLE WITH PLEASURE

One of the guiding rationales for taking a case study approach to understanding contemporary gaming culture is due to the uneven way that communication and media studies has handled the question of user pleasure over the years. Scholars have assessed audience pleasure from a number of perspectives and traditions with no systematic approach dominating the literature. Media-related pleasure has meant different things to different discourses (Fiske, 1987), mirroring in effect how human play has been conceptualized and studied by research traditions (Sutton-Smith, 1997). It is, in all likelihood, impossible to reduce pleasure to a singular, all-encompassing theory because, as Simon Frith (1982) observes, it is a socially embedded concept that "refers to too disparate a set of events, individual and collective, active and passive, defined against different situations of displeasure / pain / reality. Pleasure, in turn, is *not just a psychological effect but refers to a set of experiences* rooted in the social relations of production" (emphasis added, qtd. in O'Connor and Klaus, 2000, p. 371). It is no surprise, then, that competing definitions about media pleasure reveal diverging beliefs about its cultural implications, which stimuli or prompts give rise to pleasurable affect – elements like "control, immersion, performance, intertextuality, and narrative" (Kerr et al., 2006, p. 69) – and those that do not. This topic also plays host to disciplinary turf wars where epistemological and methodological divisions determine how pleasure is deployed by academics of different stripes.

Discourse histories by O'Connor and Klaus (2000) and Kerr et al. (2006) narrate the persistent challenges of reaching a definitional consensus regarding pleasure even within media studies. In their comprehensive literature review, Barbara O'Connor and Elisabeth Klaus (2000) argue that there are two dominant trends in the literature concerning user or audience pleasure. The first is the "public knowledge" tradition out of the Birmingham School of cultural theory that focuses on media's ideological power from mainly Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives. The second group is the "popular culture" tradition, which attempts to rescue and validate pleasure, and to demonstrate that it operates as a form of resistance to political and cultural power. O'Connor and Klaus (2000) state of this dichotomy: "The 'public knowledge' strand has focused on audience readings of non-fiction media texts and has paid little attention to the concept of pleasure, whereas the 'popular culture' project has been concerned centrally with 'tastes' and the pleasures of fictional genres and less with questions of ideology" (pp. 378-379). Fortuitously for this project, war games – both the patently fictional and the near-real "ripped-from-the-headlines" variety – speak to issues of state power (public knowledge) and mediated play (popular culture), and are potential research objects for both orientations. The authors suggest that a comprehensive analysis of meaning-making processes is one viable path of linking user pleasure with questions of ideology and hegemony for media analyses, stating:

> Emotion and cognition, entertainment and information, pleasure and ideology, fact and fiction all seem to be intimately linked in the process of sense-making. Pleasure directs cognitive processes and determines attention and selective awareness. It is the emotional, sensual and imaginative feeling that leads audiences to actively turn to and process a given content. This is a pre-requisite

> for understanding – without selective attention no cognition would be possible – but at the same time it limits the scope of people's interpretive practices because pleasure is socially embedded and intimately linked to social relations of dominancy and cultural hegemony. (O'Connor and Klaus, 2000, p. 381)

Media pleasures are affective, personal responses to a range of mediated interactions, reflecting the formal affordances of communication technologies and their social capital. That is, "The pleasurableness of a media event is not arbitrary, but is linked to social positionings and contexts of media use" (O'Connor and Klaus, 2000, p. 382). Understanding the manner in which ludic war pleasures are created and experienced demands a multi-faceted analytical perspective that can make sense of how an affecting media technology operates within its contexts of use and is situated in popular discourse.

Aphra Kerr, Julian Kücklich, and Pat Brereton (2006) narrate a similar historical schism regarding pleasure in the media studies literature. Like Simon Frith (1982) and O'Connor and Klaus (2000), Kerr et al. see these concepts as emerging from historically situated, material processes. "Pleasure is a relative term, always constructed in relation to displeasure and with multiples (*sic*) sources, from textual to social and contextual" (2006, p. 68). The authors accordingly stress the need for foregrounding the place of social practice in media research to overcome the historic divides in the critical literature between the literary and economic-oriented traditions (read: cultural studies versus political economy), and to make room for innovative approaches to new media theory.[12] Their recommendation brings us to one of communication's most contested terms.

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[12] It is worth noting that, like my own work, Kerr et al.'s thinking about how best to interpret media culture and its pleasures as interconnected practices enacted by cultural producers and consumers that operate within established representational and semiotic

RECLAIMING INTERACTIVITY

Our definitional wrangling does not end with media practices and pleasures. Indeed, there is arguably no single term in the new media lexicon more pervasive yet more vague than "interactive" (or "interactivity"). Communication researchers have long attempted concept explications of interactivity, hoping to arrive at operationalizable definitions for empirical research concerning the many, disparate uses and effects of information communication technologies (see, Rafaeli, 1988; McMillan and Downes, 2000; Kiousis, 2002). Game and media studies scholars have similarly wrestled with the slippery term, though these analyses have been more squarely aimed at understanding how the video game form shapes its interactions with its operators and what this interplay means for the industry and broader public debates about its merits and ills (e.g., violence / aggression, representations of gender and race, the educational potential of games, etc.).

For example, new media scholar Janet Murray (1997) – whose seminal work I return to next chapter – observes that computational media really has participatory and procedural affordances, and that there are substantial differences between actions that are merely interactive (she offers the example of games of chance as simplified actions with effects), and mediated opportunities for exercising agency and intentionality in a digital domain. Media theorists Lev Manovich (2001) and Alexander Galloway (2006) largely avoid the term because they see interactivity as mischaracterizing the computational and programmable nature of new media and video games, and that it carries unproductive discursive baggage. Specifically, Manovich contends there is a problematic conflation

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regimes is in debt to Nick Couldry's call for understanding media as "an open set of practices" (2004) and P. David Marshall's "intertextual commodity" (2002) concept.

between the psychological processes of interacting with media generally (i.e., all media are interactive in a psychological sense), with the medium-specific demands of programmable media. And Galloway, who hails from a media studies background, wants to avoid the murky active audience debates (or interactive, as the case may be) to address the medium's dialectical relationship with gamers. Still others, like Kerr et al. (2006) and Julian Kücklich (2005), posit that interactivity ought to be discarded or replaced with neologisms (Kücklich suggests "playability") that more clearly make sense of human play in these textual encounters. Kerr et al. (2006) contend that interactivity is more likely a marketing term than a structural characteristic of new media because of the way that it has been co-opted by the culture industries (pp. 72-73).[13]

Despite these legitimate objections, this project employs interactivity cautiously, fully recognizing the term's contested history in the literature and its clumsy and hyperbolic deployment by technological Utopianists in the press.[14] This project believes in the necessity of reclaiming interactivity, especially for understanding the media industry's strategic deployment of the term in all of its ambiguous promise (e.g., as a formal characteristic, a discursive guarantee, a means of interfacing with audiences, etc.).

The "interactive" in this project's title refers to both the actionable play mechanics inside the games that once acted upon structure and guide the gamer's ludic experiences, *as well as* the industry's techniques for designing and selling their digital

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[13] The authors' preferred term "play" is no less immune to commercial forces and interests. Indeed, "play has been increasingly colonized by the culture industries well beyond childhood in recognition of its heightened importance in the formation of the audience's pleasures at the beginning of the new millennium" (Marshall, 2002, p. 69).
[14] See Kline et al. (2003, p. 14) for a summary of interactivity's rhetorical dimensions.

wares that determine the kinds of games that appear on store shelves, and establish the main parameters of gaming culture that coalesce in public venues and private living rooms. To clarify, I use interactivity in two distinct ways: to describe a formal property of the video game form, *and* as a social activity that makes that formal property recognizable.[15] In other words, interactivity describes the cybernetic or "ergodic" machinations of the video game as "textual machine" (Aarseth, 1997); and it is the intertextual, cultural modality that connects gaming to extant cultural forms, genres, and narratives. This duality of form and cultural positioning permits us to make sense of new media (including games) by referencing older media[16] – a point made clear by P. David Marshall's (2002) "intertexual commodity" concept. In tandem, Aarseth and Marshall's concepts illustrate that games comprise a wealth of interactive and interacting practices.

In his seminal *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), Espen Aarseth conducts one of the first sustained examinations of the formal, mechanistic elements of dynamic texts such as interactive fiction and video games.[17] He introduces the term "intrigue" as a way to illuminate how the textual machinery operates in an adventure game versus how it might function in a mystery novel. He states:

> The difference between dramatic and ergodic intrigue is that the dramatic intrigue takes place on a diagetic, intrafictional level as a plot within the plot and, usually, with the audience's full knowledge, while ergodic intrigue is directed against the

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[15] Russell Richards (2006) positions interactivity similarly, stating that it is a "contextualizing facility that mediates between environments and content and users and enables the *generation* of further content" (emphasis in original, p. 532).
[16] I return to the issue of textual and contextual media modality in Chapter 1.
[17] Aarseth coins the term "ergodic," a combination of the Greek words ergon for "work" and hodos for "path," to describe the "nontrivial effort [that] is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1997, p. 1).

> user, who must figure out for herself what is going on. Also, ergodic intrigue must have more than one explicit outcome and cannot, therefore, be successful or unsuccessful; this attribute here depends on the player. (1997, pp. 112-113)

The player's position within ergodic intrigue is that of the "intriguee," and is a transcendental position that "depends on the strategic identification or merger between the player and the puppet" (p. 113). This merger of player and character is a popular point of focus in game studies because of what it means for identification and learning (see also, the work of James Paul Gee, James Newman, Zach Waggoner), but also because what it means with respect to pleasure – specifically the pleasure of choice and/or control. He notes: "The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent. The cybertext reader on the other hand, is not safe, and therefore, it can be argued, she is not a reader. The cybertext puts its would-be reader at risk: the risk of rejection" (p. 4). This state of uncertainty (one might also say, the state of play) allows the user to exercise narrative and experiential control over the ergodic work, and thus derive unique pleasures absent from non-ergodic media like non-interactive films and TV programs. The user's uncertain mastery of an ergodic work hinges on her ability to master the textual machine. "The ergodic work of art is one that has certain requirements built in it that automatically distinguishes between successful and unsuccessful users" (p. 179). It is not sufficient for the user to simply "play" with the dynamic text; to master the video game, players must master its operative logic. And it is through a sustained attention to the mastering of this rule system, alongside processes of representation and narration, and extra-textual strategies of meaning-making that the critic can stake claims about gameplay pleasures.

Moving outside the formal textual machinery but not the contextual and commercial apparatuses, P. David Marshall draws our attention to the innumerable ways that advertisers and communities of practice figure into audiences' interconnected understandings about media products. His "intertextual commodities" concept argues that audiences are encouraged to playfully interact with texts across platforms and technologies, and that these associations constitute a complex matrix of cultural forms. Interactivity and play are as critical to the cultivation of user pleasure as they are to the culture producers' institutional practices of product creation and marketing. Marshall rightly notes (as others have [e.g., Ruggill, 2009; Kackman et al., 2010] that this has long been standard operating procedure for the culture industries (i.e., think P.T. Barnum's publicity stunts). However, digital technologies and user-created content have amplified the complexity of these intertextual matrixes, while institutionalizing play as a commercial strategy. Marshall notes: "The new intertextual commodity identifies the attempt by an industry to provide the rules of the game, while recognizing that the pleasure of the game is that rules are made and remade, transformed and shifted by the players" (2002, p. 80). This is the reason why, for all of its conceptual baggage, when interactivity is understood as a complex web of user actions and textual affordances shared between producers and consumers, texts and marketing materials, the concept productively complicates static or technologically-determinist conceptualizations of the author-text-audience relationship (see, Cover, 2006), even if it invites exhausted (and exhausting) debates about what constitutes (inter)active (or inactive) audiences.

Thus, a compelling reason for reclaiming interactivity is because – as Aarseth and Marshall's concepts tacitly argue – it is understood as facilitating states of play within *and* around popular games, and between gamers and the interactive games industry. Game designer and scholar Ian Bogost (2007) argues as much, adopting fellow game designer-theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's definition of play, as "the free space of movement within a more rigid structure" (p. 42). Of course, the play experience neither requires a literal space, nor does it even necessitate interactive technologies. The "movement within a more rigid structure" might very well be the movement of imagination within a word puzzle. Conversely, the presence of technologies alone will not necessarily produce interactive states of play. All play requires a ludic "leap of faith." An example: an elevator button is not a plaything for a lawyer running late to a meeting. But that same button (or rows of buttons) could be an enticing plaything for that lawyer's precocious, twin daughters. There is nothing inherently playful about elevator buttons; but it also does not foreclose the possibility of play so long as there are those willing to take an imaginative leap and craft a magic circle around it. This simple example underscores that mediated interactions are never idealized, Platonic phenomena, but are historically located events bounded by their techno-cultural environs.

These numerous complexities explain why scholars have employed novel titles when re-conceptualizing the new media user as something other than a viewer or reader: be it a "player" (Marshall, 2004; Roig et al., 2009), a "viewser" (Harries, 2002, p. 172), an "intriguee" (Aarseth, 1997), a "virtual citizen-solider" (Stahl, 2010), or some other neologism (like "button-pushers" in the case of the lawyer's daughters). Whatever title

or terminology, the point remains that "…video games introduce a 'playful' subject position in our relation with media, for example, transforming the established 'spectatorship' relation with audiovisual products to a more interactive engagement with media, which reflects the playfulness present in new media practices" (Roig et al., 2009, p. 95). The study of interactivity and its pleasures, thus, requires an examination of play.

Invaders!, Ludic Displeasure, & Politicizing the Magic Circle

The Dutch historian and sociologist Johan Huizinga (1950), who has been lionized as the veritable patron saint of game studies, is one of the first to consider the cultural elements of human play, coining the term "magic circle" to describe the social membrane that envelopes those engaged in play. The magic circle, which occurs in sanctioned spaces and for allotted times, has ritualistic qualities such as role playing and rules of order that separate organized play from the world (e.g., playing poker at a card table, "hide-and-go-seek" in the woods, or laser-tag at an amusement park). The major shortcoming of Huizinga's original magic circle concept, however, is that it is too idealized, too Platonic. The magic circle is not a metaphysical shield that insulates players from the world. Rather, the magic circle is a permeable social barrier that filters out certain extraneous forces, while allowing others elements through. That is, after all, why any virtual world or play space is culturally meaningful. The magic circle is penetrable for the same reason why culture is dynamic – because it is people who constitute and animate the magic circle, and not some set of unbending, a-historic rules. Game scholars have since qualified the original, overly idealized magic circle concept,

and it remains a productive idea for media and game studies because it connects human play to broader cultural forces.

The commercial gaming apparatus facilitates interactive states of play for in-game magic circles (i.e., mediated gameplay proper), while forging the key extra-gamic relationships among its primary agents: the game and player, the game and its industry, and the player and the game industry (i.e., the overlapping sections of the ludic war Venn diagram [see, Fig. 0.2]). The play of the gaming apparatus, or the give and take between existing structures and emergent freedoms, characterize the internal gameplay logic of the video game and the gamer's mediated experience, *as well as* the industrial and economic pressures that studios negotiate when producing games (e.g., fulfilling generic expectations while offering something innovative, or selling war games without violating social norms and mores). That is, there are textual freedoms and constraints to any rule-based video game, just as there are contextual freedoms and constraints for the industry that produces those games, and the negotiations between player-purchasers and media firms. Indeed, were it not so awkward, a more apt subtitle for this book might be "The *Interacting* Pleasures of Military Video Games" since the forces of production, marketing, and consumption enable gamers and the industry to play and replay with the popular imaginary of war and nationhood during moments of complex global crises.

As Stanley's *Invaders!* art piece usefully demonstrates, not all combat games are designed to engender user pleasure. Interventions by artists and activists are a powerful reminder that popular culture remains a negotiated terrain, and that military games have their share of fans and critics. Given the emotive power of the 9/11 attacks and its

images, it is not surprising that *Invaders!* was criticized for daring to embed a recent tragedy within a fictionalized gamespace. After all, the art piece literally invited participants to play with protecting the WTC. Mixing what is arguably the most traumatic and central image of the 9/11 attacks with coin-operated playthings from yesteryear was simply too much for some to bear. Yet for those attendees who actually played the game, there was an additional layer of frustration – an element that may have escaped those who only heard about the installation.

In Stanley's motion-sensitive art game homage, players return fire at the incoming horde by aiming and waving their hands at the projection screen (contrary to some initial inaccurate reports, the player is most certainly trying to protect the Towers). Yet, as Michael McWhertor (2008) remarks on the game blog *Kotaku*, *Invaders!* makes for a distinctly unpleasant experience. Would-be WTC defenders must use their bodies to shoot frantically. But because the descending aliens never cease their massive descent – emptying one screen of aliens is replaced by another – the game sets the player up for inevitable failure. *Invaders!* is a "game" that cannot be won. It has no ending other than leaving players exhausted and frustrated. And therein, according to the project's artist and defenders, lies the game's critique of U.S. war policy.

Figure 0.7: A gamer defends the Twin Towers in *Invaders!*[18]

On his blog, Stanley (2008) responds to those who critiqued his installation without having experienced it, quipping: "For me at least, a video game is at some point always going to be about its gameplay" (n.p.). Later, he continues in that same posting:

> Sure, there is something definitely ambiguous about defending the towers in a game, and some complex emotions that, indeed, might be a little too raw, or odd, for some, even in an 8-bit representation that is highly stylized and presents itself immediately as such. But whatever one decides in the end, I have heard many a cry within the gaming world that we need to take into account the internal logic of games, and that means actually understanding the mechanics of its gameplay, and respecting its figurative tropes. (Stanley, 2008, n.p.)

[18] Image from: http://cache-03.gawkerassets.com/assets/images/9/2008/08/invaders_hands_on_01_01.jpg

Stanley's observation about his own work echoes a central concern in media and game studies over how to interpret the complex meanings that arise from this curiously interactive medium. I agree with Stanley: competent game analyses – be they popular news reportage or scholarship – should not attend to a title's representational strategies (the image of the Twin Towers) without also asking questions about the game's underlying algorithms or rule structures (What does it mean to play a game that can't be won?), and its social play context (such as an art exhibit at a game convention).

Invasion! is a uniquely provocative countergame, though it is neither alone in sentiment nor in its preferred medium of expression.[19] Modern warfare's commercial representations are critiqued in a wide range of anti-war game projects: from original digital games, to game modifications, to machinima (short films made with repurposed video gameplay content), to in-game protests. For example, Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12th* makes it is impossible to eradicate scrambling terrorists without causing collateral damage that then breeds more radicals. Jon Griggs' *Deviation* (2005), a short machinima movie made within the first-person shooter *Counter-Strike* (1999), examines the unquestioned tactical protocols and cyclical violence of the first-person shooter genre. The Velvet-Strike art team made use of *Counter-Strike* in the wake of the U.S.-led Global War on Terror to craft anti-war spray paint modifications that players could use to inject political commentary into their virtual combat zones. And as part of his "dead-in-iraq" protest, digital artist and scholar Joseph DeLappe tirelessly types the names of the U.S. soldiers killed overseas in the public chat screens of the military's best-known

[19] See Galloway (2006, chapter 5) for a discussion of the countergame movement.

recruitment game, *America's Army* (2002). These countergames and artistic interventions are clearly antithetical to the play logic typical to most commercial military-themed video games. *Invasion!* et al. destabilize the ostensibly safe parameters of the video game's "magic circle" by injecting realities of war into these diegetic play spaces, and actively deny to gamers the pleasures typically found in combat shooters.[20]

In the weeks, months, and years after 9/11, the Twin Towers found themselves falling again, and again, and again, in an endless loop of media replay. The mediated trauma of the coordinated terrorist attacks quickly became a rallying point for collective national unity and international support, even as the images were simultaneously being mobilized as justification for a new aggressive brand of foreign policy that demanded preemptive American military action against perceived national threats. The attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent U.S.-led Global War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq gave rise to worldwide anxieties that fueled a panoply of artistic responses across media: from performance art, to street theater, to short films, to video games. Projects like *Invaders!*, *September 12th*, and "dead-in-iraq" that are made of or through the video game medium are particularly well-suited for highlighting how our understanding of contemporary warfare is intimately, if not inseparably, linked to popular representations of combat, be they cinematic, televisual, or in the case of video games, computational in origin. These anti-war interventions, which operate at the margins of the games community, also throw into dramatic relief the methods and strategies by which the majority of the commercial

[20] For additional analyses of military countergames, see Part V of Huntemann and Payne's (Eds.), *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (2009).

shooters at its center are crafted and packaged to sell pleasurable combat experiences – experiences that engender what John Fiske (1989) calls "hegemonic pleasures."

The famed media and cultural critic makes a distinction between two prevailing forms of pleasure. According to Fiske, there exist "popular pleasures" which "arise from the social allegiances formed by subordinated people, they are bottom-up and thus must exist in some relationship of opposition to power (social, moral, textual, aesthetic, and so on) that attempts to discipline and control them" (p. 49). By and large, these are not pleasures of commercial military shooters (though there might be cerebral pleasures of playing anti-war games). Military shooters instead reward gameplay choices that follow mission guidelines, tactical protocols, and the swift elimination of perceived threats. Fiske would label the exercise of disciplinary power over oneself and others in military games as being hegemonic in nature; as expressing a "conformity by which power and its disciplinary thrust are internalized" and "are widely experienced" (1989, p. 49). More to the point, the critique posed by countergames *only* makes sense if one first understands how most war games operate – computationally, ideologically, and culturally. For this reason, this book examines popular military "shooter" games and ludic war culture, in effect, to answer the tacit questions posed by the aforementioned countergames' collective critiques; namely: how *exactly* do commercial military shooters make virtual war fun? And what might this type of war play mean, politically and culturally speaking?

POLITICAL DESPAIR AND MEDIATED RENEWAL

The marketplace successes of military shooters notwithstanding, commodifying and marketing contemporary conflict remains a challenging task for entertainment

producers across media because postmodern warfare – discussed in detail next chapter – is characterized by its conspicuous absence of a transcendent and principled political agenda (Hammond, 2007). The U.S. public's suspicion of military interventions began at the conclusion of World War II, became increasingly evident throughout the Vietnam War, and was patently obvious by the time the Cold War ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall. In *The End of Victory Culture* (2007), public intellectual and cultural historian Tom Engelhardt observes how, "It is now practically a cliché that, with the end of the Cold War and the 'loss of the enemy,' American culture has entered a period of crisis that raises profound questions about national purpose and identity" (p. 10). But the political crisis that attends to postmodern war is not the lone consequence of either having or not having some compelling Other. The crisis predates the end of the Cold War and is connected to the era's dominant mode of war production.

The decline of America's "victory culture" that Engelhardt masterfully chronicles (spanning from the end of World War II in 1945 until the extraction of U.S. personnel from Vietnam in 1975) is a cultural symptom of total war's obsolescence as the primary mode for national defense during the twentieth century. Total war, or a nation-state's mobilization of all (or nearly all) its resources for conflict, ended as a viable defense strategy with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These nuclear strikes proved that the use of atomic weapons by multiple nations engaged in a total war scenario would make it all but impossible to distinguish war's winners from its losers. Therefore, symmetrical war, which had been the idealized form of conventional armed conflicts in World Wars I and II (imagine two sides squaring off with roughly equal resources), was a

strategic impossibility for nations armed with nuclear weapons, as it introduced a potential state of mutually assured destruction.

Media representations of war and the Baby Boomers' war play changed alongside the end of total war, since it foreclosed the possibility of a lasting, American total victory and foretold an atomic age of potential nuclear horrors. According to Engelhardt:

> So those children of the 1950s grasped the pleasures of victory culture as an act of faith, and the horrors of nuclear culture as an act of faithless mockery, and held both the triumph and the mocking horror close without necessarily experiencing them as contraries. In this way, they caught the essence of the adult culture of that time, which – despite America's dominant economic and military position in the world – was one not of triumph, but triumphalist despair. (2007, p. 9)

This state of "triumphalist despair" continued unabated as nuclear proliferation spread and the U.S. and Soviet Union ratcheted up their atomic arms production, effectively solidifying a Cold War stalemate that would last nearly half a century. And because the U.S. and Soviet Union could not attack one another directly without risking a military escalation that might end in mutually assured destruction, their interests were expressed through proxy conflicts like the Cuban Missile Crisis, the CIA's support of Pinochet's regime in Chile, and the Soviet-Afghan War. However, none of these altercations left as lasting or deep a scar on the American psyche as the Vietnam War.

In the years following the U.S.'s defeat in Vietnam, American entertainment coped with this unexpected and unprecedented military loss by re-establishing the modern "warrior cult," or what sociologist and historian James William Gibson calls, the "New War." In *Warrior Dreams*: *Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America* (1994), Gibson argues that this New War culture attempted to "fix" the national identity crisis

through numerous cultural goods including, pulp novels, live-action war games, and revisionist Hollywood films that would give American soldiers a second chance to solve the problems caused by feminists, peace activists, and meddling and spineless politicians. Foremost among these New War cultural playthings are combat films that fantasize about a return to Vietnam, and the consequences of failing to respond to national threats with deadly force. Many of these films are not just nationalistic fantasies – they are veritable para-programmatic guides for how decisive warriors might fix the broken social order. "America has always celebrated war and the warrior. Our long, unbroken record of military victories has been crucially important both to the national identity and to the personal identity of many Americans – particularly men" (Gibson, 1994, p. 10). The military entertainments and playthings of Gibson's "new war," like those of Engelhardt's "victory culture," are similar insofar as they are collective responses to national traumas during an era of postmodern warfare. The loss in Vietnam (despite the U.S.'s overwhelming technological and financial resources) and the vulnerability to nuclear attacks (despite being the first nation to engineer the atomic bomb) are situations that asked: "If Americans were no longer winners, then who were they?" (Gibson, 1994, p. 10). Or, as Engelhardt inquires: "Is there an imaginable 'America' without enemies and without the story of their slaughter and our triumph?" (2007, p. 15). These distressing questions of triumphalist despair that began after World War II and which matured during the Vietnam quagmire and the long Cold War, would all but seemingly dissolve into air on a sunny Tuesday morning in lower Manhattan.

Media pundits were quick to opine that: "9/11 changed everything." Yet the tone of American discourse was oddly familiar in the wake of the attacks. And why should this not be so? The terrorist attacks tapped into deep-seeded fears of reprisal, fractured the national myth of post-Cold War invulnerability (remember we were told by political theorists like Francis Fukuyama that Western liberal market-driven economies had delivered us to a final state of social evolution? – it was our "end of history"), and the attacks reintroduced the discourse of national and military triumphalism that had been nascent for over a quarter century. The seeds of guilt and future comeuppance had actually been sown with the final twin strikes of World War II. In this instance, what is past is truly prologue. Engelhardt (2007) reflects:

> If the 9/11 attacks were a traumatic shock to Americans, at a deeper level we had known they were coming. Not, as conspiracy theorists imagine, just a few of the top officials among us, but all of us – and not for weeks or months, but for over fifty years. That's why, for all the shock, what came to mind was, in a sense, so familiar. … Americans were already imagining versions of September 11th soon after the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. That event set the American imagination boiling. Within months of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all the familiar signs of nuclear fear were already in place – newspapers were drawing concentric circles of atomic destruction outward from fantasy Ground Zeroes in American cities, and magazines were offering visions of our country as a vaporized wasteland, while imagining millions of Americans dead. (pp. 306-307)

The knee-jerk American response to this national wound, as represented in popular discourse and culture, was not to investigate the roots of this psychological and political trauma but to reaffirm reactionary and conservative ideals. Susan Faludi documents in *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (2007) how we (i.e., Western popular culture and Americans) ran to insulate "ourselves in the celluloid

chrysalis of the baby boom's childhood" (p. 4). Like Engelhardt, Faludi sees the gendered and sexist responses to 9/11 as being symptomatic of a general (and, indeed, generational) unwillingness to interrogate the material causes underlying the attacks, or the vulnerability of our social infrastructure. Rather than asking questions about why America's technology might be turned against itself by well-funded, non-state terrorists, the response was to laud cultural artifacts from a "simpler time" (e.g., TV Westerns and war stories from Engelhardt's victory culture) and to reproduce ideals from supposedly halcyon days-gone-by. Faludi observes:

> From deep within that dream world, our commander in chief issued remarks like "We'll smoke him out" and "Wanted: dead or alive," our political candidates proved their double-barreled worthiness for post-9/11 office by brandishing guns on the campaign trail, our journalists cast city firefighters as tall-in-the-saddle cowboys patrolling a Wild West stage set, and our pundit proclaimed our nation's ability to vanquish "barbarians" in a faraway land they dubbed "Indian Country." (Faludi, 2007, pp. 4-5)

Later, she continues:

> Taken individually, the various impulses that surfaced after 9/11 – the denigration of capable women, the magnification of manly men, the heightened call for domesticity, the search for and sanctification of helpless girls – might seem random expressions of some profound cultural derangement. But taken together, they form a coherent and inexorable whole, the cumulative elements of a national fantasy in which we are deeply invested, our elaborately constructed myth of invincibility. (Faludi, 2007, p. 14)

Americans quickly embraced fantastic entertainment that promised Manichaean moral universes, and mythological, frontiersman heroes that could reaffirm and reconstruct our national mythology as the world's lone military superpower.

Military shooters are among this throng of politically reactionary media as they facilitate play opportunities for striking back at virtual terrorists with extreme martial

prejudice. In fact, military shooters stand ready to manufacture, negotiate, and maintain the American warrior identity in the early twenty-first century, as Hollywood's post-Vietnam and Reaganite films did during the twentieth century – recall Stahl's epochal transition from war spectacle to interactive war. Moreover, because military shooters offer immersive and interactive experiences of American exceptionalism, providing users with ways of enacting and experiencing the "Bush Doctrine" of foreign policy (see, Chapter Three) – which maintains that the liberal democratic, market-driven political paradigm can and should be exported, and that preemptive military force is one viable way of realizing this goal (see, Fiala, 2008; McCrisken, 2003) – these games perpetuate the historical and ideological conflation between the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor with al-Qaeda's assault on the World Trade Center to make the War on Terror and 2003 Invasion of Iraq as morally defensible as the America's involvement in World War II. Many of these games, echoing the popular political discourse issued in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, short-circuit historic fact; they attempt to elide a half century of interventionist foreign policy and numerous proxy wars, to access the moral capital of a just war born out of necessity (I discuss this textual "slight of hand" in Chapter Two).

Contemporary military shooters not only "play games" with the past, however. A fair number of the most popular titles likewise imagine a near-future America that is either under threat or under attack from outside forces. These proleptic games (Smicker, 2009) premediate future catastrophes to foreclose the possibility of experiencing another

9/11-like national trauma (Grusin, 2010).[21] Like human play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and popular mythology (Mosco, 2004), premediation is not necessarily bound to any factual state of affairs, present or future. According to Grusin (2010): "Premediation is not about getting the future right, but about proliferating multiple remediations of the future both to maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock that the United States and much of the networked world experienced on 9/11" (p. 4). This helps to explain why the lion's share of military shooters produced after 9/11 possess fearful narratives that take place in the future before or after fictional attacks on the U.S. These games resonate with players not only because they premediate the trauma of 9/11, but – as importantly – because they give players a means of striking back against the titles' varied crises. Such performative responses are unavailable while watching the original attacks on TV, or in fictional films that trade in similar imagery. It is this critical technological affordance of a militarized gameplay that reanimates the bygone myth of victory culture in games when it fails to gain traction in other militainment. It bears underscoring that the video game's form and the shooter genre do not *a priori* demand such a handling of national trauma. However, its

[21] Richard Grusin (2010) coins the term "premediation" to conceptually complement his and Jay David Bolter's earlier "remediation" (1999). But whereas remediation is new media's (or, as he prefers now, mediality's) re-articulation and updating of previous communicative and artistic expressions in new media forms and formats, premediation is about modeling potential, future states for specific political ends. Grusin notes about his two key terms' point of connection: "Premediating the future involves remediating the past. Premediation is actively engaged in the process of reconstructing history, particularly the history of 9/11 in its incessant remediation of the future. Thus the historical event of 9/11 continues to live and make itself felt in the present as an event that both overshadows other recent historical events and that continues to justify and make possible certain governmental and medial practices of securitization" (2010, p. 8).

commercial imperatives and genre expectations make it difficult to avoid such ham-handed choices.[22]

Figure 0.8: A horrifying promotional poster for *Modern Warfare 3* (2011) depicts a decimated New York City on the iconic *Time* magazine[23]

[22] The puzzle game *Portal* (2007), for instance, is an ostensibly non-shooter game presented in the first-person shooter format.

[23] This is the first instance of *Time* authorizing the use of its signature border and nameplate on a commercial product. Time's publisher Kim Kelleher states: "This is where the boys are," and that this collaboration with Activision is "a great way to connect with millions of people we might not have otherwise connected with" (Peters, 2011, n.p.)

STRUCTURE OF FEELING REDUX

Irrespective of whether one enjoys or even plays military shooters, video games are a commonplace part of our digital lives. The NPD Group, a major marketing and consumer research firm, reports that more Americans played video games than attended movies in the first six month of 2009, and that game purchases accounted for a "one-third of the average monthly consumer spending in the U.S. for core entertainment content, including music, video, [and] games" (NPD Group, 2009, n.p.). The game industry's major lobbying group, the Electronic Software Association, celebrates the following facts: "sixty-eight percent of American households play computer or video games"; "the average game player is 35 years old and has been playing games for 12 years"; "forty percent of all game players are women"; and that "in 2009, 25 percent of Americans over the age of 50 play video games" (ESA, "Industry Facts," 2009, n.p.). These figures fly in the face of the long-standing (and largely incorrect) stereotype of games being diversionary toys consumed by misanthropic boys. This also means that more Americans play games than those who do not, making gaming a distinctly *mainstream* phenomenon.

The rapidly increasing ubiquity and accessibility of video games does not, however, mean that we should neglect to study the power they wield as popular culture. George Lipsitz reminds us of ordinary cultural objects' ability to tell us about ourselves:

> For all of the triviality and frivolity, the messages of popular culture circulate in a network of production and reception that is quite serious. At their worst, they perform the dirty work of the economy and state. At their best, they retain the memories of the past and contain hopes for the future that rebuke the injustices and inequalities of the present. It might be thought a measure of the inescapable irony of our time that the most profound intellectual questions emerge out of what seem to be ordinary and commonplace objects of study. (1990, p. 20)

Commercial military-themed war games and their attendant ludic war experiences perform cultural functions on both ends of Lipsitz's popular culture spectrum: they reinforce problematic ideologies like American exceptionalism and celebrate interventionist military policies (see, Chapter Three), while simultaneously giving gamers unique opportunities for forging and growing social bonds, enjoying immersive role-playing experiences, and exploring and testing strategies for collaborative problem solving (see, Chapter Five).

The project's interest about how pleasure is produced by gaming's interacting commercial processes and social circuitry begs a more difficult question about military gameplay's relationship to the broader national identity: in particular, what do these ludic pleasures mean, or what does this war play say about post-9/11 American culture? Answering this question is this book's endgame, and it will be taken up most fully and forcefully in the Conclusion. For now, it is useful to preview briefly how ludic war's affective, hegemonic pleasures reflect underlying economic and cultural forces.

The ludic war experience represents a mediated "structure of feeling," to borrow Raymond Williams' term, that at once expresses concerns particular to the contemporary moment, while also making public the material processes that bring that cultural formation into being. Over the course of his influential career, Williams (1977) never explicitly defines his structure of feeling, though some critics argue his reluctance to do so is strategic.[24] In what is perhaps his most definitive articulation, Williams explains the

[24] David Simpson (1992) contends that the "degree to which the structure of feeling is not articulated to the point of 'theoretical satisfaction,' despite its deployment throughout

structure of feeling as a broad experiential process that contains specific "internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" that generates social values and meanings that are "actively lived and felt" (p. 132). The structure of feeling is, in effect, a "cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence" (Williams, 1977, pp. 132-133).

Commercial military shooters concerning postmodern war simulate war scenarios between U.S. soldiers and terrorist groups for gamers' entertainment. These titles' narratives and gameplay demands express a range of post-9/11 anxieties concerning terrorism, militarism, and state power; and their production histories and supporting materials (including their discourse and advertising efforts) evidence the game industry's strategic machinations for interfacing with its varied constituencies during a time of war. This book's goal over the following chapters is to disclose how military gameplay's interacting circuitry works towards producing these affective pleasures – or in Williams' phrasing, the interacting structures for the production of the ludic war feeling – that make these games commercial successes, and how, when taken together, the ludic warring attempts to resurrect, revitalize, and re-imagine a virile, militaristic national identity that rises Phoenix-like from the ashes of the Twin Towers.

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twenty years of major critical work, suggests a strong resistance to such theorization" (p. 21). Sean Matthews (2001) agrees with this, posting that the "suggestive, provisional, even vague quality of the [structure of feeling] is in fact therefore its virtue" (p. 191).

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book examines those social actions and gameplay practices that make playing post-9/11 military shooters fun. This book takes seriously Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson's (2008) call to critically analyze gameplay as an important experiential phenomena, while trekking beyond the formal player-game interactions to understand how gaming pleasures are produced by extra-textual forces (pp. 6-7). Accordingly, this project pursues a multiple-case study design because it is a comprehensive research strategy[25] for understanding how producers, marketers, and players negotiate the major commercial and cultural concerns of military gaming in real life contexts – including representing and remembering conflict and politics (text), sanctioning and commoditizing appropriate kinds of mediated violence (paratext), and the social environment of gaming (context). It is my belief that the continued popularity of the military shooter is due to the interconnected forces and practices that allow players to find manifold pleasures in virtual warring in the wake of the political crises produced by the 9/11 attacks and the Global War on Terror.

Chapter One employs "gameplay modality" (King and Krzywinska, 2006) to explain how the military shooter format makes virtual conflict pleasurable by offering players intimate battlefield views and performative liberties not afforded by other war entertainment, in effect, overcoming the perspectival distances and political anxieties that hound other militainment. These games seek to have it both ways: they wish to be read

[25] According to case study expert Robert Yin (2003): "The holistic design is advantageous…when the relevant theory underlying the case study is itself of a holistic nature" (p. 45).

as "realistic" by connecting symbolically and thematically to worldly strife, while making available to players medium-specific affordances that make for pleasurable play experiences. By attending to the gameplay similarities and differences of seminal war shooters produced decades apart, media critics and historians can understand how generational changes in gaming technologies and play mechanics affect virtual war experiences in foundational ways. In particular, the game industry's movement towards producing ever-increasing immersive and narrative-based gameplay is an attempt to ameliorate war's crisis of meaning so it may be neatly packaged, sold, and played.

Chapter Two examines the first-person modality that dominates the best-selling *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) and, its sequel, *Modern Warfare 2* (2009). These titles are noteworthy for placing players in different war theaters as soldiers *and* civilians who fight and die. These shifting points of view engender a paradoxical subjectivity that is at once situated in individual battles, and one that transcends space and time. This interpersonal modality of play models the "sacrificial citizenship" (Kahn, 2010) that characterizes post-9/11 American political identity – one that hails all citizens as *de facto* conscripts for a war that may demand, at any moment, the greatest of personal sacrifices.

Chapter Three analyzes the way two Tom Clancy brand video game franchises – *Rainbow Six: Vegas* and *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* – transform the author's prosaic technothriller fiction into ludic form, giving players an interactive means of playing through the discourse of American exceptionalism. By examining the games' design choices in light of the critical commentary around Clancy's commercial empire, I argue that these titles support the Bush administration's policies and tactics of preemptive

military force after 9/11. By remaining attentive to what these games ask us to do, and how they represent U.S. soldiers, we can critically appraise the pleasures of becoming a technowarrior and how game design choices reflect and support the tenets of American exceptionalism in the new century.

Chapter Four shifts the project's focus to the extra-textual forces that shape ludic war culture. This chapter studies how three gaming paratexts – production personnel interviews, press reviews, and online video game advertisements – prefigure how "military realism" is ideally interpreted for the best selling military shooter of 2007, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. This *Call of Duty* installment presents a valuable case study because it is an extremely popular title across gaming platforms and online gaming services (selling well over 11 million units as of February of 2009 for the PC, Xbox 360, Playstation 3, and Nintendo DS systems [VG Chartz.com][26], and it was the second most played multiplayer game on Xbox Live in 2008 [after *Halo 3*][27]), and because it is the first of the storied franchise to be set in the twenty-first century (the previous *Call of Duty* games were World War II shooters). The marketing paratexts that circulate around *Call of Duty 4* not only generate excitement for the game and work to drive sales, but they also suggest particular textual readings over others, hoping to inoculate the pleasures of their publicized ludic wars from threats of moral panic backlash.

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[26] Activision has sold over 11 million game discs for the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 console versions of *Call of Duty 4*. The sales numbers are higher if one includes the PC and Nintendo DS numbers. Also, in the gaming industry, any title that sells over a million copies is considered a blockbuster.

[27] http://multiplayerblog.mtv.com/2009/01/05/top-20-xbl-games/

The final two chapters examine the manifold pleasures of playing ludic war in their social contexts. **Chapter Five** presents a participant observation of a gaming center where hardcore gamers engage in all-night competitive gaming events. This chapter's ethnographic description explores the social codes and conventions present in a commercial play space that supports a variety of gaming experiences, and finds that the social environment is shaped as much by the military shooters as it is by the center's devoted gamers. Moreover, the competitive ludic war experience often escapes its mediated bounds, as the rules and relationships founded on virtual battlefields find gendered and charged expression in the physical gaming space.

Chapter Six uses interview data drawn from a focus group with avid players to examine the foremost pleasures of maintaining one's gaming capital and identity as a "hardcore" gamer in a shared play space and in online play sessions. The previous chapter's participant observation is my "outsider" etic account of a localized play culture; whereas Chapter Six presents an "insider" emic account of these players' practices in their own words. This chapter confirms many of Chapter Five's gameplay "lessons," and reveals that avid gamers regularly negotiate the conflicting modalities of ludic war play.

The **Conclusion** is a brief coda arguing that the military shooter is not only the quintessential post-9/11 video game, but that it ought to be thought of as the apotheosis of contemporary militainment. These final remarks theorize how ludic war's affective structure of feeling stands ready to save postmodern war's legacy from its own moral and tactical shortcomings. In short, these mediated battles hope to "reset" the victory culture mythology by making virtual war fun and pleasurable. This book is about how that

symbolic and experiential campaign for gamers' "hearts and minds" is waged in and around video games' virtual battlefields, and what these virtual battles say about American identity and gaming culture after 9/11.

SECTION I:

TEXTUALITY OF LUDIC WAR

Chapter One

Nintendo War 2.0: Towards a New Modality of Ludic War Play

It is a great irony
that a child
tortured by fears
of nuclear holocaust
should take such delight
in a game
that gave its own
programmer
nightmares
of the apocalypse;
the mushroom cloud
rising as a splash
of red pixels,
the dream maker
tortured
by his own creations.

Meanwhile,
I lose the last base:
blew my missiles too early,
panicked; couldn't
pace myself "My God, we're
all going to die," I thought,
and we did.

The Game Over screen comes up
and, with sweaty palms
I whisper one word, standing
in awe of the end
of life as we know it:
"heavy…"

fun game.

-- The "Missile Command" entry in Seth Barkan's creative writing collection about video games, *Blue Wizard is about to Die* (2004, p. 73)

INTRODUCTION

Audiences for contemporary war films have been diminishing steadily over the course of the protracted U.S.-led military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. The conspicuously empty theater seats have been matched in living rooms by a similarly anemic viewership of war-oriented television programming. Media and war scholar Susan Carruthers (2008) rightly observes that along with fictionalized combat films, documentaries about the recent conflicts – whether they focus on the military, media, or civilian populations – have not fared much better, and that war entertainment's absent audiences present a clarion call for media and war scholars to contextualize and historicize "this attenuation of attention" (p. 71). In his *Time* magazine column, "Where are the War Movies?," Richard Corliss (2006) speculates that Hollywood's disinterest in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars could be attributable to several factors: possibly a lack of political consensus and battles that can be dramatized easily; or that these wars have touched relatively few American households; even cinema's waning influence as a cultural form. And while ticket sales themselves do not explain the underlying reasons for the growing disinterest in Hollywood's combat fare, data pulled from the film industry site Box Office Mojo (Fig. 1.1) demonstrates empirically and emphatically the growing commercial disinterest for combat movies set in the post-Cold War period produced during the early years of the twenty-first century. Even the perennially popular WWII genre has not fared as well over this same period, as only a few major war films produced after 9/11 have enjoyed the box office success of similar period films produced several years earlier – films like *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998),

and *Pearl Harbor* (2001), each of which grossed globally $98 million, $482 million, and $450 million, respectfully.

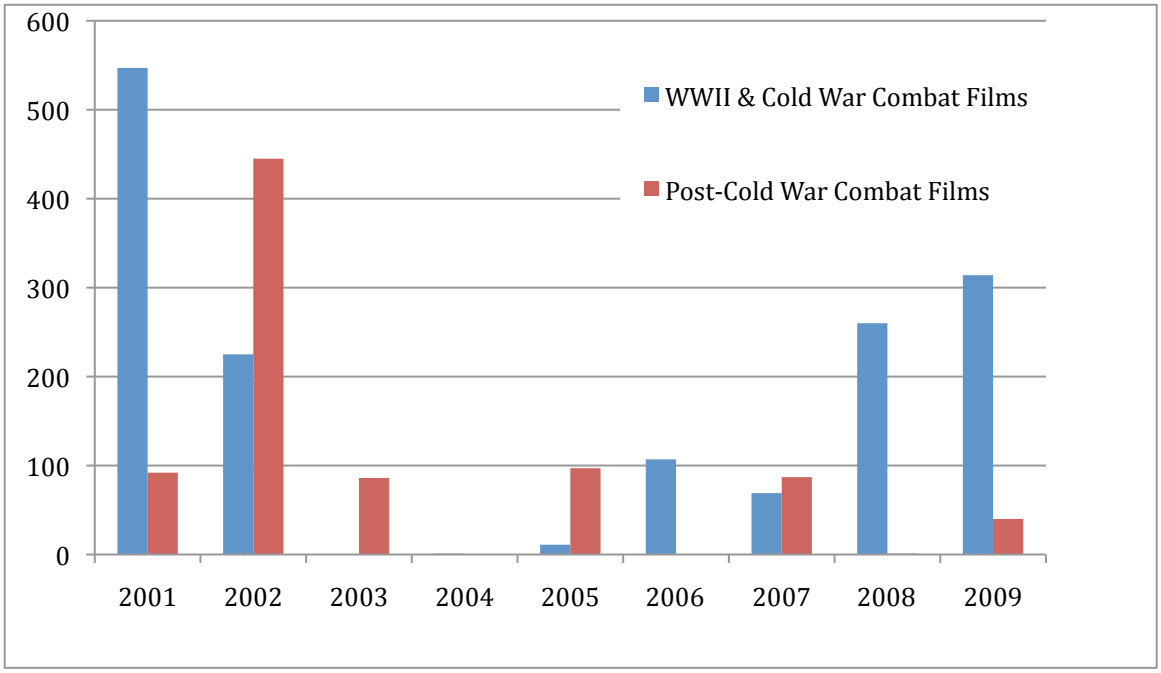


Figure 1.1: Global Box Office Receipts for Hollywood's Top-grossing Combat Films, 2001-2009 (in millions of US Dollars)[28] (Source: Box Office Mojo, 2010)

Curiously, the journalistic and scholarly observations heralding the decline, if not the commercial death, of moving image war entertainment produced during the first

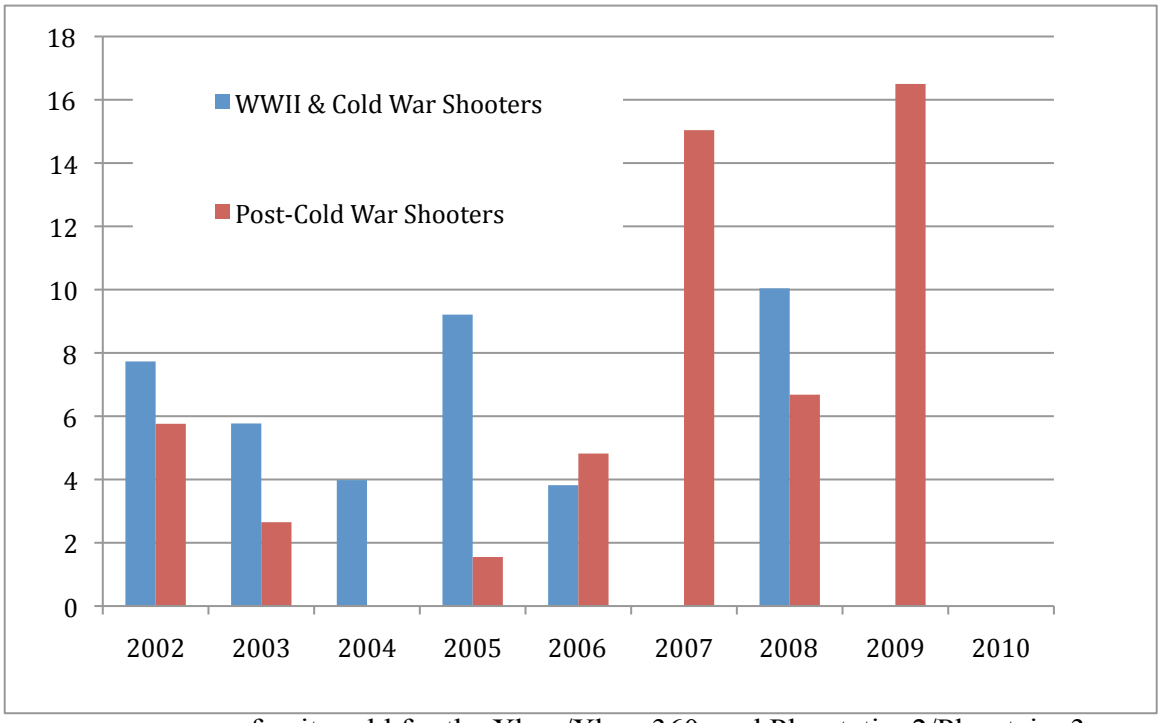
[28] Ticket sales are from boxofficemojo.com. The parentheses contain sales revenues (in millions of US dollars). The WWII films include: 2001: Enemy at the Gates (97), Pearl Harbor (450); 2002: Hart's War (32), We Were Soldiers (115), Windtalkers (78); 2003: n/a; 2004: Saints and Soldiers (1); 2005: The Great Raid (11); 2006: Days of Glory (23), Flags of Our Fathers (66), Flyboys (18); 2007: Letters from Iwo Jima (69); 2008: Defiance (51), Miracle at St. Anna (9), Valkyrie (200); 2009: Inglourious Basterds (314). And the Post-Cold War combat films include: 2001: Behind Enemy Lines (92); 2002: Black Hawk Down (173), Collateral Damage (78), Sum of All Fears (194); 2003: Tears of the Sun (86); 2004: n/a; 2005: Jarhead (97); 2006: n/a; 2007: The Kingdom (87), Redacted (<1); 2008: Battle for Haditha (<1); 2009: The Hurt Locker (40). [Ticket sales compiled on April 15, 2010].

decade of the new century have almost entirely forgotten or ignored video games. The preeminent counterfactual case in point is the November 10, 2009 release of Activision's military-themed *Modern Warfare 2*. Not only was this sequel to the popular *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) the best selling video game of 2009, it was the single biggest entertainment launch in *history* – netting over $406 million dollars during its first day on store shelves and eclipsing the $1 billion dollar mark in under two months (Fletcher, 2010, n.p.; Guinness, 2010, n.p.). This means that *Modern Warfare 2* earned more money during its first five days on store shelves than Hollywood blockbusters like *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* and *The Dark Knight* ("which holds the U.S. box-office record with $203.8 million in first five-day sales" [Reisinger, 2009, n.p.]).[29]

Using sales data culled from the game industry site Video Game Chartz, the following graph evidences a different, rising trajectory for WWII and post-Cold War themed combat video games released during the first decade of the new century as compared to film trends.[30]

[29] These remarkable sales figures were surpassed by the game's 2010 sequel, Call of Duty: Black Ops (Raman, 2010, n.p.).

[30] I do not mean to equate box office receipts to game sale, as they are not equivalent media purchases or experiences. I am interested in the trends' differing trajectories.



of units sold for the Xbox/Xbox 360, and Playstation2/Playstaion3 systems)[31]

Modern Warfare 2 and its franchise sequel *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010) are far and away the best-selling military shooters in industry history. But these releases are only the

[31] The WWII-era games include: 2002: Medal of Honor: Frontline (7.73); 2003: Medal of Honor: Rising Sun (5.77); 2004: Call of Duty: Finest Hour (3.98); 2005: Call of Duty 2 (2.47); Call of Duty 2: Big Red (4.57), Medal of Honor: European Assault (2.17); 2006: Call of Duty 3 (3.82); 2007: n/a; 2008: Call of Duty: World at War (10.04); 2009: n/a; 2010: Call of Duty: Black Ops. And the Post-Cold War games include: 2002: SOCOM (3.44), Conflict: Desert Storm (2.32); 2003: SOCOM II (2.65); 2004: n/a; 2005: SOCOM 3 (1.55); 2006: SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Combined Assault (.6), Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter (2.26), Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas (1.96); 2007: Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (13.19), Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2 (1.85); 2008: SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Confrontation (1), Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas 2 (3.45), Battlefield: Bad Company (2.23); 2009: Modern Warfare 2 (22); 2010: Battlefield: Bad Company 2 (5.5), Medal of Honor (5); 2010: Call of Duty: Black Ops (26.5) [Games sales figures compiled on April 15, 2010].

resent high points of a commercial trend that has been running counter to the reception of other combat media for years. These mediums' different trend lines beg the research questions that drive this chapter and book: why do contemporary war games sell in a media environment that is not favorable to other militainment; and what contextual forces and medium-specific traits might explain their success?

It bears repeating at this early juncture that there is no *single* answer – no "smoking gun" (if you'll excuse the pun), virtual or otherwise – for what makes combat games' ludic war experiences fun and popular. In one of the first mainstream press analyses of modern military shooters' popularity, games journalist and *New York Times Magazine* editor Chris Suellentrop argues that *Modern Warfare* and similar titles have proven that "players have an appetite for games that purport to connect them to the wars their college roommates, or their sons, might be fighting in" (2010, para. 2). The aesthetic and narrative emphasis on realism is undoubtedly true for some gamers; but this explanation only gets us so far. As the book's introduction argues, media-based pleasures are over-determined phenomena, as are the textual, paratextual, and contextual elements that contribute to any media artifact's financial and affective successes (i.e., those forces and practices examined in this and in the following chapters' case studies). Media pleasure's inherent complexity is further complicated by the culture industries' colorful array of intertextual production and marketing practices. Media and game scholars have appropriately examined the diverse, constitutive elements that make immersive games like first-person shooters (FPS) pleasurable: textual characteristics ranging from immersion / presence (Murray, 1997; McMahon, 2003) and agency /

control (Aarseth, 1997, Grodal, 2000), the visual and narrative intertextuality that connects games to film (both Hollywood cinema [Wolf, 2001; Bryce and Rutter, 2002; Galloway, 2006] and experimental filmmaking techniques [Brooker, 2009]), to a participatory community that that expands the gaming experience (Nieborg, 2005; Jones, 2008), and which modifies titles and crafts new one during times of political crises (Lowood, 2008).

This chapter and the ones to follow are also not the first to make sense of military shooters in light of their extant political contexts. The critical pieces that have been published to date concerning the representations of twenty-first century war in video games evidence overlapping and complementary observations about the positive framing of post-Cold War military policies and technologies. For instance, scholars have examined the discursive fidelity between the cinematic and gamic versions of *Black Hawk Down* (Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2007); others have argued that this form of media play contributes to a militarization of everyday life and are attempts to popularize net-centric warfare and preemptive strikes to control the future (Mirrlees, 2009; Smicker, 2009), and how game narratives have shifted away from the underdog story of one soldier against many (i.e., the Rambo story), to the "overmatch" narrative where an elite team is still outnumbered, but is armed with overwhelming technological support and combat skills (Thompson, 2009).

Keeping these textual and contextual insights in mind, the current chapter examines how the first-person shooter game format creates an attractive textual means of interacting with the politically unpleasant aspects of postmodern conflict. Specifically, it

argues that the military-themed shooter functions as a structuring play modality that narrates and personalizes postmodern military interventions. Postmodern war – a contested term that will be explored shortly – possesses vexing traits that make its popular representation problematic, as is evinced in part by combat cinema's waning commercial appeal during a time of war. By contrast, military-themed shooters employ a uniquely suited modality of play that addresses the challenges of making war play pleasurable during a time of international martial conflict.[32]

Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's (2006) concept of "gameplay modality" is employed in first half of this chapter to make sense of how interacting with video games – like other forms of human play – carries its own set of expectations and attitudes (its own "context-defining frame") regarding how these texts are understood in relation to and separate from other media interactions (p. 20). Combat video games' intertwined contextual and formal markers of modality signify repeatedly that these objects are to be played with, and invite players to engage in sanctioned ludic war performances in their mediated gamespaces; meaning, even if the manifest screen content of military shooters look, sound, and possess themes similar to other war entertainment and news reportage, first- and third-person shooters offer players performative liberties not afforded by other media seeking to commodify the War on Terror. These games want to have it both ways: they want to be read as "realistic" by connecting symbolically and thematically to

[32] The third-person perspective (in third-person shooters) is also an immersive point of view, though not as intimately subjective as the first-person perspective.

worldly strife, while simultaneously making available to players medium-specific textual affordances that enable pleasurable play experiences.

Of course, not all war games are created equal, and gameplay modalities – like media culture *writ large* – represent dynamic and fluctuating textual configurations that change over time, reflecting specific historical moments and modes of production. The final section of this chapter accordingly examines the major gameplay similarities and differences between two seminal war shooters produced decades apart. This comparison illustrates how generational changes in gaming technologies and play mechanics affect gamers' ludic war experiences in foundational ways, and it argues that the movement towards producing increasingly immersive and narrative-based ludic war is an attempt to ameliorate postmodern war's crisis of meaning.

POSTMODERN WAR AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Postmodern war's discursive terrain and its definitional wrangling by critics is the key historical and political backdrop against which military shooters and their ludic war pleasures are evaluated and experienced. In fact, and as I argue shortly, commercial militainment struggle to succeed in the marketplace precisely because of postmodern war's varied epistemological and ontological challenges; i.e., how can war entertainment be appear efficacious or truthful when contemporary war's narratives, images, and reportage are held in such suspicion? Video games are not immune to these commercial and representational challenges. However, game producers have been able to use gameplay's unique modality to navigate postmodern war's commercial hurdles. Reviewing postmodern war's conceptual and historical legacy will allow us to better

understand why military shooters engender specific textual pleasures (Chapters Two and Three), and why and how marketers pre-frame their digital wares (Chapter Four).

War and media scholar Chris Hables Gray (1997) argues for the postmodern label for contemporary warfare for two reasons. First, according to Gray, modern war has its origins in the 1500s when "total war" (the mobilization of all a nation-state's resources for the purposes of winning a conflict) became a physical and organizational possibility, and its end with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when the use of atomic weapons in a total war scenario would make it all but impossible to distinguish war's winners from its losers. Second, the representations and practices of contemporary war share enough similarities with postmodernism's paradoxical cultural phenomena, generally speaking, to warrant the admittedly tricky label. The paradoxes of contemporary war (again, according to Gray) are fueled in equal parts by new technologies and modernist logics of rationality and social organization that evolved during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although Gray unquestionably focuses on the role of technological innovation in driving changes in warfare (not unlike technics scholar and historian Lewis Mumford or even cultural critic Paul Virilio), he credits information as being the preeminent tool in the warfighter's toolbox. Gray notes: "As a weapon, as a myth, as a metaphor, as a force multiplier, as an edge, as a trope, as a factor, and as an asset, information (and its handmaidens – computers to process it, multimedia to spread it, systems to represent it) has become the central sign in postmodernity" (1997,

p. 22). Friedrich Kittler (1999) and Paul Virilio (1999)[33] agree with this emphasis, having themselves labeled contemporary warfare as "infowar." Kittler notes that ever since the late Cold War, the Pentagon has moved from Electronic Warfare, which is the attempt to gain control over the electromagnetic spectrum, to Information Warfare, or the "fight over digital technology with digital technology" (1999, p. 176).

For other media and war critics, information control and technological advances explain only so much. Philip Hammond, in *Media, War and Postmodernity* (2007), observes that descriptions of postmodern war tend to over-emphasize two major themes: (1) the proliferation of smart technology that distances soldiers from targets, and (2) an attendant media spectacle produced by news firms and the culture industries that actively conflate the actual with the virtual (p. 18). Hammond divides the "postmodern war" scholars into those who position the first Gulf War as the apotheosis of postmodern warfare and who highlight the deployment of high-tech weapons and near real-time media coverage (e.g., James Der Derian, Chris Hables Gray, Douglas Kellner, and Jean Baudrillard[34]), and another group who sees postmodern war as mainly small, low-tech intrastate conflicts in developing nations or in Eastern Europe over local politics and organized crime (e.g., what Mary Kaldor [1999] calls the "new wars" of low intensity conflict between small groups [ethnic groups, terrorist organizations] versus "old wars"

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[33] Virilio employs a diverse range of terminology (e.g., pure war, infowar, and electronic war) when he speaks of contemporary warfare, although I'm unclear on whether he is consistent in his usage. For example, he calls Vietnam history's first electronic war due in large part to the electronic-acoustic "MacNamara Line" that was developed by researchers at Harvard and MIT (Virilio, 1989, p. 82).

[34] It bears noting that there is *considerable* theoretical variation and disagreement within this grouping.

between large nation-states). The point of division between these camps, according to Hammond, is that the former group privileges the role of technologies and media spectacle versus the latter cadre that sees local, identity politics as being postmodern war's most formative characteristic. Hammond (2007) situates his own work between these poles, arguing that:

> … war and intervention since the Cold War have been driven by attempts on the part of Western leaders to recapture a sense of purpose and meaning, both for themselves and for the their societies. This in turn has led to a heightened emphasis on image, spectacle and media presentation. Yet it is not really the media themselves that is the problem, even though some reporters and commentators have actively colluded in the process. Rather, it is the changing character of war which is at issue, and behind that, a fundamental shift in the policies of Western societies, summed up as the "end of Left and Right." (p. 11)

Bringing these critical threads together, we can argue that postmodern warfare's break with modernity is its political rupture *as it is expressed through* its info-centric technological transformations. Ironically, the end of the Cold War did not solve but exacerbated postmodern warfare's ontological crisis. Building on the work of Zaki Laidi (1998), Hammond argues that the post-Cold War period introduced a crisis of meaning for Western governments who lost their best, go-to enemy – the Communists. "That is to say, the fall of the Berlin Wall signaled the end, not only of communism, but all forward-looking collective projects for the foreseeable future. In postmodern terms, one might say that the end of the Cold War represented a collapse of grand narratives" (Hammond, 2007, p. 14). The West's loss of its "Other" engendered a vacuum in the political imaginary; a void that was unsatisfactorily filled by humanitarian missions and (what some have called) "cosmopolitan interventionism" that recognizes others' suffering.

However, "Sympathy for others' pain and suffering is a lowest-common-denominator approach to humanity which emphasizes individual human frailty and vulnerability. It is about as far away from a future-oriented collective project as one can get" (Hammond, p. 35). Such a vague political project begs questions like: what exactly counts as suffering; why choose one humanitarian mission over another; and when exactly have we "won"? It bears underscoring at this juncture that the term "postmodern," as the aforementioned critics use it, reference the dominant mode of war production in the West and how it gains popular representation. The embattled term is intended as a diagnostic label that highlights the duplicitous newness and image-based simulacrum of war. Postmodern for these scholars is neither a celebration of the new, nor should it suggest a material or epistemological rupture with the past.

Hammond rightly argues that the post-Gulf War humanitarian and peace-keeping missions of the 1990s (e.g., Somalia, Kosovo) were politically unsatisfying because "therapeutic war" (his term) cannot help but to be disappointing when compared to previous conflicts that had more compelling and nationalistically beneficial political agendas. The rise in military interventionism predicated on humanitaranism is a direct outgrowth of the "collapse of the political sphere" (Hammond, 2007, p. 57). Hammond continues: "Indeed, to a great extent the attraction of this discourse lay in the fact that it was anti-political. Putting morality above *realpolitik* and vested interest, it appealed directly to no interest, and addressed itself to no particular constituency" (emphasis in original, p. 57).

Therapeutic war's underlying discourse is nothing new to American culture.

According to rhetoric scholar Dana Cloud (1998) it is the "discursive pattern of translating social and political problems into the language of individual responsibility and healing," and it had become a dominant political rhetorical strategy and thematic motif across U.S. popular culture following the social turmoil of the late 1960s (p. 1). Therapeutic discourse's spread during the Vietnam War and especially in its wake, maps over well with what Hammond (and others like Gray and Douglas Kellner) have said about postmodern war's impacts on how war is waged, how it is perceived – including the domestic crises supposedly engendered by "the Vietnam Syndrome" – and later, the distinctly un-therapeutic, humanitarian missions of the 1990s. Thus, the low intensity conflicts of the early post-Cold War period are less a direct outgrowth of technology than they are a lack of a compelling, unifying political mission; or as Hammond puts it, "The humanitarian spectacle…was a symptom of the crisis of meaning, not a solution to it" (2007, p. 58).[35] The end of the Cold War allowed this war-as-therapy discourse to flourish and weave its way into the language of 1990's humanitarian missions. The post-Cold War's crisis of meaning and its politically impotent interventions ended in a flash on September 11, 2001 – or so it would initially seem.

The War on Terror was not the solution to postmodern war's identity crisis. This amorphously labeled war lost its patina in a few short years thanks to a cavalcade of strategic missteps by the Bush administration. In fact, not long into George W. Bush's

[35] It bears noting, however, that these low intensity conflicts are viable interventions because newer technologies allow for minimal loss of life and just-in-time military assemblage, even if these same technologies themselves do not offer any moralistic or ethical foundation for their deployment.

second term, the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan were characterized by the mainstream press – the same press that had enthusiastically endorsed the initial invasions – as being politically suspect at best, and criminally mischievous at worst. This persistent public distrust of postmodern warfare is primarily a two-fold issue concerning the efficacy of documentary, news-gathering practices, and the political motivations driving the military interventions, reflecting the two dominant camps of postmodern war critics. That is, the public and the press question the very veracity of that which is being represented and reported, as well as the political ideals motivating the government's shifting foreign policy aspirations – a political apprehension that has migrated to entertainment wares about post-9/11 military conflicts.

One of the foremost reasons why the War on Terror has been difficult to re-package into entertainment commodities is because the daily news coverage of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars has been handled like high-concept Hollywood products. From its earliest stages, journalists and commentators saw the War on Terror as an overtly calculated and transparent attempt by the U.S.-led coalition powers at "creating an image of purposefulness" (Hammond, 2007, p. 59). The news media's self-conscious awareness of the manufactured quality of the war reportage – indeed, its awareness of modern war as media spectacle – undercut the coalition's case that their campaign was righteous and just; "…the coalition's obvious intention to generate good PR simply confirmed the perception that the war's presentation was carefully crafted and

manipulative" (Hammond, 2007, p. 66).[36] The cases of the U.S. government's blatant image and information manipulation are numerous. Events and policies that have contributed to the public and news media's justifiable skepticism about the war efforts include, in part: the famous April 9, 2003 toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad by Iraqi civilians (in fact, the media event was spearheaded by the Army's psych-ops team [Zucchino, 2004, n.p.]); the longstanding ban on publishing photographs of soldiers' remains returning to Dover Air Force Base (this restriction, which was instituted in 1991 by George H. W. Bush, was lifted in 2009 by the Obama administration [Taylor, 2009, n.p.]); the broadcasting of government-produced news reports supporting a range of policy efforts, including regime change in Iraq, in the nation's largest TV markets (Barstow and Stein, 2005, n.p.); and the manufactured stories of battlefield heroics created for Private First Class Jessica Lynch and Corporal Pat Tillman (in actuality, Lynch's rescue was a carefully coordinated media event [Kampfner, 2003, n.p.], and Tillman was not shot and killed by an Afghan militia but by "friendly fire" – but not before being preemptively memorialized as a war hero [Laurence, 2007, n.p.]).

Of all the examples one could cite, the U.S. government's PR *piece de resistance* during the early years of the War on Terror remains President Bush's aircraft carrier landing and "Mission Accomplished" address. This $1 million piece of televisual stagecraft invited sharp criticism from journalists and Democrats who saw the event as little more than a thinly veiled re-election stunt (Rampton and Stauber, 2003, p. 9). Yet

[36] Visual studies scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff (2005), whose work I utilize in the next chapter, sees the government and news outlets' media fabrications in a similar light, calling them "farce" that lacked the photographic punch of previous wars (Chapter 2).

for all the media cynicism that characterized the news coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the attitude about the truthfulness about the images and "spin" did little to dampen news outlets' general support of the wars, or reporters' complicity and collusion in spreading misinformation (recall Judith Miller's reporting on WMDs for *The New York Times*). Mortal combat remains a boon for ratings, cynicism notwithstanding.

Given the skepticism surrounding the war planners' political motives and their shifting strategic goals – mission objectives which changed from finding WMDs, to bringing Saddam Hussein to justice and freeing the Iraqi people, to advancing democracy in the Middle East – there is little wonder why entertainment producers sought to sell a less confusing war that was beyond the moral reproach of the day. Hollywood's return to WWII during the late 1990s and early 2000s was a commercially adept maneuver that permitted cultural producers to articulate popular anxieties about a nation at war while remaining optimistic about the U.S.'s chances of victory, a position that was increasingly untenable as the coalition's litany of post-invasion missteps grew, including its failure to capture Osama Bin-Laden "dead or alive." In additional to its financial sense, returning to WWII also makes cultural sense given the numerous comparisons linking 9/11 to the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (the term "New Pearl Harbor" has been used by the Bush administration's defenders and its critics [see also, Mahajan, 2002, pp. 11-12]). The comparison of these homeland attacks (irrespective of the events' legitimate similarities or differences) signals a desire for establishing a historical precedent for justifying the use of military force, and the centrality of the moving image in the documentation and collective memory of these traumatic events – be they black and white newsreels of

decimated battleships in Hawaii or handheld videos of smoking skyscrapers atop the New York City skyline.

The comparisons between Pearl Harbor and 9/11 also explain why moving image representations of combat, even that of patently fictionalized conflicts, invite public debates about the moral appropriateness of war entertainment. The issue is an especially thorny one for War on Terror media chiefly because it implicates the viewer in as-yet unsettled historical events. Even fictional post-9/11 combat entertainment cannot help but allude to the terrorist attacks – sometimes obliquely, sometimes explicitly – and America's counterinsurgency responses. This is the source of recent war media's cultural salience, but it is also a potential stumbling block if war's representations are mishandled (or perceived to be mishandled). Visual studies scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff and author of *Watching Babylon: the War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (2005) whose work is invoked in the following chapter offers this observation about combat imagery: "…the war image in particular comes guaranteed by the full faith and credit of the sanctioning government that allows it to be seen. It is an event that creates a sense of identification or disidentification. In short, the representation of war as global culture reconfigures individuals in history by means of visual imagery" (p. 77). War imagery is thus not simply about communicating some visual truth about what happens on the battlefield, or representing the daily reality that soldiers face. When viewed broadly, war imagery – including its fictional depictions across media – is also about the audience's identification with the nation's history and political mythologies, including its ideals of citizenship. Again: war games and war media are not created equal. These militainments mediate

between individuals and their national imagined communities in medium specific ways and to different ends. The discussion turns now to examining how video games' representations of war are thought to connect (or not) with worldly strife.

MEDIA MODALITY AND PLAYING WITH REALITY

The chapter's driving question about why military shooters succeed commercially in commodifying the War on Terror while other moving image media do not invites a series of more difficult questions about users' expectations about the relationship between war and differing media forms, and the congruence (and incongruence) between fictional media's depiction of combat compared to the consumer's lived understanding of it. Fortunately, the concept of "modality" has been used to explicate a "particular attitude toward an activity and how that activity is situated in relation to what is understood to be the real world" (King, 2008, p. 53). Complicating matters: this term may *also* refer to the means by which a semiotic system functions in creating an affective experience (i.e., modality as a mode of representational or narrative conveyance). This chapter cautiously deploys modality in both of these senses because the ideas are interrelated, and because the modern military shooter's gameplay is a synthesized experience of user expectations concerning war games' relationship with reality generally (modality of gaming context), and the design technics by which military shooters produce their liminal but affective gaming experiences (modality as a semiotic system of representation, a mode, or as a way of doing things). Thinking of media modality underscores this project's methodological emphasis on understanding game culture as the result of fluctuating and interlocking social practices. The study of the media modality of ludic war culture is, in effect, the

study of how video games, producers, players, marketers, et al. make virtual war fun. This chapter now examines the two registers of modality in turn, with the remainder of this section assessing how games relate to the reality of war (modality of gaming context), with the final section comparing two famous military shooter games to demonstrate how gameplay modality (modality of gaming textuality) is a historically contingent configuration, representing the media technologies that animate them.

Media and game scholars Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2006) contend that the video game possesses its own modality because the form possesses medium-specific semiotic and use markers differentiating it from other visual media (i.e., a combination of contextual framing routines and internal textual traits). Moreover, the medium uniquely solicits and hails would-be players to experience its computational algorithms and (in some cases) its immersive narratives *as a game*, as something to be explored and played with. The authors borrow "modality" from Hodge and Tripp's (1986) research on children's perceptions of TV reality and fantasy, which the latter scholars have taken from linguistics (where that discipline has most closely scrutinized the modality of verbal language [Hodge and Tripp, 1986, p. 104]). For linguists, "modality" denotes the *perceived reality or certainty* of a given message. And like Hodge and Tripp's research on televisual content, King and Krzywinska use modality to think through how video games represent fantasy and reality differently than other visual media, and how user expectations about that entertainment form shape public discourses and debates around gaming. Media modality underscores the dynamic relationship between gaming's contextual and textual elements. Specifically, the way that games represent and possibly

impact one's lived reality (context), as well as the design technics by which games simulate that reality, or a close facsimile of it (text).

Any message's modality is predicated on a range of modality markers that differ from one medium to another. These modality markers are communicative elements that work together and/or at odds with one another to produce a perception of a message's ontological realness. Modality markers include elements as varied as: three-dimensionality, color, detail, movement, music, sound effects, etc. Individuals' modality judgments, or their beliefs about a message's connection to reality, are based on a range of these medium-specific modality markers; i.e., the modality markers for spoken language are different than those of body language, visual media, sound, etc. The modality (and the markers) for visual and photographic messages and media are thought to be generally quite high, since the sign and referent are often either indistinguishable or highly indexical; "The power of language systems is that there is a very great difference between the signifier and the signified; the power of film is that there is not" (Monoco, 2000, p. 158).

To clarify, the sense of realism or, on the other hand, the perceived unreality of a message – be it a political statement, billboard advertisement, animated cartoon – is *not* equivalent with the absolute veracity of that same representation or message. We are talking here about the *perceived* truthfulness of a representation, and whether and to what extent that sense of truth is shared across social interactions. Hodge and Tripp underscore this critically important distinction, stating:

> The modality of a statement is not its actual relation to reality, its truth, falsity or whatever: it is a product of the judgment about that relationship which the speaker makes, wants, or enables the hearer to make, and the judgments that hearers do actually make by drawing on their selective reading of the variety of cues that are available as potential bases for moral judgments. (1986, p. 106)

Media modality is therefore neither an unchanging aesthetic or generic category like sci-fi or fantasy with standard representational elements, nor is it a message's singular truth-value about a state of affairs. Rather, a message's modality is a complex site of social contestation, and its truthfulness is constantly being re-negotiated by interested parties[37] – "[modality] is nearly always a complex, even contradictory package of claims and counter-claims" (Hodge and Kress, 1988, p. 127). One non-ludic example of message modality's shifting discursive contours is the contentious debate over the so-called "death panels" that grabbed headlines during the 2009-2010 U.S. healthcare reform effort. Former Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin popularized the pejorative term, alleging that giving the federal government more control over regulating heath care costs would result in rationing care to sick Americans (i.e., government bureaucrats would be making choices based on finances, not doctors based on need; point of fact: the current U.S. system already rations care on the basis of income). The ensuing public debates, which unfolded across media old and new – from cable news programs and newspapers to social media like twitter feeds and facebook pages – engaged the veracity of the claim, but as significantly, the term morphed into a talking point and rallying cry for political

[37] A slightly related concept might be the parodic "truthiness." "Truthiness" – which was popularized by comedian Steven Colbert, and which was named the 2006 "word of the year" by Merriam-Webster – includes "truth that comes from the gut" and those concepts and ideas that one wishes to be true, even though they may not be so factually.

opposition to regulatory reform; the point was often less about whether death panels were or could ever be a reality, but the point became instead that the idea of the death panel played into narratives about the shortcomings of government-controlled healthcare.

The debate over a media message's connection to reality is nothing less than the fight over the epistemological and ontological high ground, and ultimately, the exercise of social control. Hodge and Kress make this point clear:

> Social control rests on control over the representation of reality which is accepted as the basis of judgment and action. This control can be exercised directly on the mimetic content that circulates in a semiosic process, or it can be exercised indirectly, through control of modality judgments. Whoever controls modality can control which version of reality will be selected out as the valid version of that semiotic process. (1988, p. 147)

There are two major fronts where debates over a representation's connections to reality unfold: on a textual or representational level (i.e., that which is being depicted), and on a contextual or social level (i.e., public debates over a medium's ability to communicate such truths). The current chapter and the next two are concerned mainly with games' textual representations, while Chapter Four tackles the latter point; specifically, how advertisers work to mitigate consumers' concerns about the simulation of violence.

King and Krzywinska (2006) wisely note that modality markers vary across the same semiotic mode, and that these same markers may enjoy variation within the same generic category for that singular semiotic mode.[38] For example, although they are both

[38] This claim echoes a similar point made by Hodge and Kress (1988): "Different genres, whether classified by medium (e.g., comic, cartoon, film, TV, painting) or by content (e.g., Western, Science Fiction, Romance, news) establish sets of modality markers, and an overall modality value that acts as a base-line for the genre. The baseline can be different for different kinds of viewer/reader, and for different texts or moments within

first-person shooters with similar control schemes, there is a considerable difference between the fantasy markers in the sci-fi shooter *Doom* (1993) and the historical markers in the WWII shooter *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002) (p. 21). These textual variations alter user expectations concerning their respective modalities and shape subsequent debates around these games. King and Krzywinska state:

> Games whose localized modality markers lean towards the realism/authenticity end of the scale are, on balance, more likely to become subjects of controversy in debates about real-world issues. By making claims to authentic representation of Second World War contexts, in some respects, *Medal of Honor* opens itself up for potential criticism about the adequacy of the simulation it offers of aspects of an historical experience. (2006, p. 22)

Figures 1.3 and 1.4: The player fires the BFG 9000 in *Doom* (1993)[39] (L), and rests with a Thompson machine gun in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002)[40]

This is precisely why modern military-themed games like *Kuma War* and *America's Army* tend to attract criticisms concerning their representations of military history and

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texts, but these differences themselves acquire significance from their relationship to the genre's basic modality value" (p. 142).

[39] Doom image from: http://www.ripten.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/bfg_doom.jpg

[40] MoH image from: http://i.d.com.com/i/dl/media/dlimage/90/06/3/90063_large.jpeg

propagandistic recruitment, while more spectacularly violent and fantastic shooters attract media effects questions about aggression and violence (nevertheless, there remain those critics who reductively frame all first-person shooters as "murder simulators" irrespective of narrative or diegetic content[41]).

For all the variation between the modality markers within a gaming genre – those components that read as realistic and those that do not – greater still are the differences between the modality markers found in games and those literal, worldly things that these screen elements represent. That is, as "realistic" as shooter games purport to be (through their textual designs, advertising materials, etc.) the liminal state of gameplay – what the authors call a "distinct realm" – ultimately differentiates war games from unalterable combat films, TV shows, and news reports. This essential difference rooted in the activity of play produces the experiential and expectational divides that determine how these entertainment texts are read as mediating (pleasurably or not) combat past, present, and future. War films ask you to *watch* the combat on-screen; war games ask you to *play* with the combat on-screen. It is this foundational and consequential divergence in media interaction that partially explains why the public has received these intertexual artifacts differently than other war products. The graphic below (Fig. 1.5) categorizes militainment on these two axes of modality. The X-axis represents the relative number of modality markers that are thought to connect (or not) with reality (contextual modality).

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[41] Col. Dave Grossman uses this colorful phrase to describe the process by which video games train gamers to kill without remorse. His reactionary book, *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence* (1999) epitomizes the scientifically unsubstantiated moral panics around first-person shooters.

The left side of the spectrum favors abstracted representations; the right side favors specificity and worldly analogs. The Y-axis represents the relative number of affordances to interact with the media artifact as an interactive apparatus (textual modality).

Figure 1.5: Mapping Militainment's Modality Vectors

The "distinctive realm" to which King and Krzywinska refer is, of course, the same elusive entity as Johan Huizinga's famed "magic circle." While the concept has been productively critiqued and complicated (as this book's Introduction explains) the

Dutch sociologist reminds us that the key experiential quality of gaming rests in its participatory nature. The act of play is just that – an act – and that it is insufficient to understand play only as an epiphenomenal or shadow representation. He sounds this important reminder for media studies scholars:

> The rite, or "ritual act" represents a cosmic happening, an event in the natural process. The word "represents", however, does not cover the exact meaning of the act, at least not in its looser, modern connotation; for here "representation" is really i*dentification*, the mystic repetition or *re-presentation* of the event. The rite produces the effect which is then not so much *shown figuratively* as *actually reproduced* in the action … As the Greeks would say, "it is *methectic* rather than *mimetic*." (emphasis in original, 1950, pp. 14-15)

Studying gameplay demands studying the dialectics of play, or the liminal relationship between what is happening on the screen and what that play purports to be about. Play's inherently paradoxical nature – it is *and* it is not what it purports to be – contains echoes of modality's two main registers as this chapter has presented it.

Whatever a game's commentary on or connection to the real world – i.e., where it derives its social purchase or cultural salience – video gameplay must work to establish that connection along different fronts. Gameplay's textual modality is never a given, even if most players expect that they will be entering a distinct realm when they pick up a joystick. As an interactive set of claims about a near-real world at war, the modality of the military shooter only makes sense if we account for the varied design strategies that contribute to the creation of a given gameplay state (in addition, of course, to extra-textual forces like marketing and social play practices). The discussion turns now to examining the mutual points of connection between real and virtual war, before unpacking the underlying structures that military shooters utilize to create their

engrossing experiences. The chapter's second definition of modality, gameplay as textual transport, explains how war's horrors might be made pleasurable.

MEDIA MODALITY AND TEXTUAL TRANSPORT

Media representations of war are a profoundly complex and dynamic discursive field. Combat's breathtaking images and heartrending stories are remediated from one expressive form to another – traveling from military bloggers' video postings on YouTube, to major Hollywood productions, to radio journalists' podcasts. Hollywood has been particularly successful at memorializing and narrating America's military interventions because cinema is thought to accurately represent (or, at least, have the potential to accurately represent) such spectacular and visceral histories (i.e., with its modality and aesthetic design that includes photographic fidelity, narrative form, complex sound design that mixes musical scores with sound effects, etc.). During their considerably shorter history, video war games have often parroted and co-opted cinema's story conventions and visual spectacle, and have thus been engaged in an intertextual and inter-industrial exchange with Hollywood's war films.

Yet for as much as games owe their narrative and visual designs to filmmaking practice (see, Galloway, 2006), the first-person shooter format is nevertheless a medium-specific modality that engenders medium-specific pleasures. The shooter's narrative subjectivity (a point which receives additional attention next chapter) is culturally resonant because shooters draw on the common visual lexicon and representational tropes as other postmodern war media, while articulating these signs and markers in a ludic setting. A brief historical review will make plain how the first-person shooter gameplay

modality operates as a textual vehicle that connects its gameplay to the broader visual geneology of postmodern war's politically suspect imagery and missions.

The first-person shooter (FPS) has been a perennially favorite genre since its formation and popularization in the early 1990s. As the name suggests, the FPS has two essential conventions: its perspective and its activity. These twin components appear together in a handful of video games in the 1970s and 1980s – in fact, *Battlezone* (Fig. 1.6) is often considered to be a proto-first-person shooter. And the genre's underlying visual logic has graphical antecedents dating back many decades in cinema.[42] However, the FPS did not truly emerge as a commercially viable game format until 1992 when the game studio id Software successfully merged traversable, three-dimensional space with frenetic, run-and-gun gameplay in their PC game, *Wolfenstein 3D*. This breakout hit was soon followed by the company's other popular franchises *Doom* (1993) and *Quake* (1996). The success of these FPS shooters and the public outcry over their violent content secured id Software's infamous place in gaming history and established the FPS's generic conventions for years to come.

Anxieties about the increasingly fuzzy line between realistic and fantastic representations of mediated conflict did not begin with the War on Terror or with first-person shooters, but were voiced over a decade earlier by journalists' sobriquet for the first Persian Gulf War (1990-91) – known provocatively then as the "Nintendo War."

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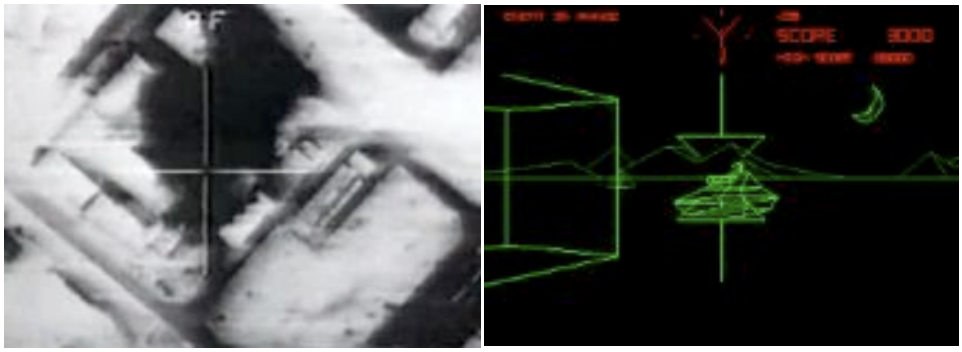
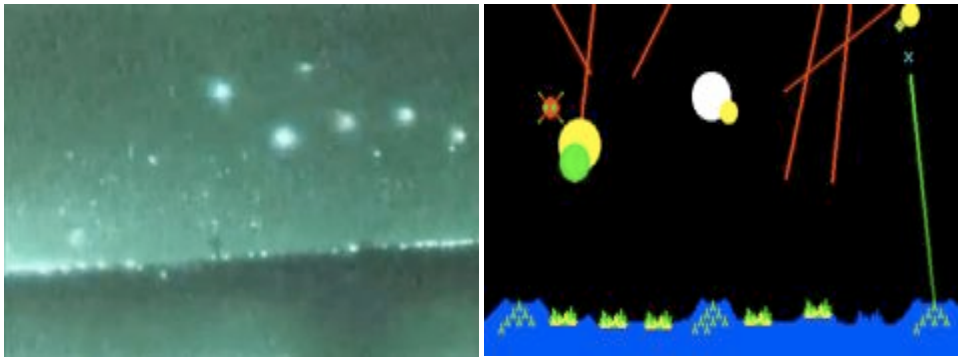
[42] Galloway (2006) cites numerous Hollywood studio films that use extended first-person sequences: Buster Keaton's *Go West* [1925], Alfred Hitchcock's *Topaz* [1969], and, most notably, Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* [1947], which is shot entirely from the subjective point of view.

This nickname was all-too apropos for the first globally televised post-Cold War conflict. News correspondents and TV pundits were drawn to this colorful descriptor because Western news outlets largely framed the conflict as a "clean" military engagement (meaning few U.S. casualties; a feeling not shared by the Iraqis who lost tens of thousands of citizens), and because of the Defense Department's steady stream of TV-friendly combat footage. Among the most celebrated moving images of the "Nintendo War" were the video feeds pulled from attack vehicles and rocket-mounted cameras that recorded the final moments of their "smart" weapons' flights. The memorable images of this war resemble the pixilated visions of destruction being played in arcades and living rooms – in games like *Missile Command* (1980) and *Battlezone* (1980).



Figures 1.6 and 1.7: A military video of a "smart" bomb striking its target (L);a player aims at an opposing tank in *Battlezone* (1980) (R)



Figures 1.8 and 1.9: Bombs rain over Baghdad during the first Persian Gulf War (L); a player shoots incoming rockets in the arcade classic *Missile Command* (1980) (R)

Striking as these graphic similarities are, there is a more consequential correspondence between the mainstream news and game industry's similarly evolving story-telling techniques in between the Gulf Wars of the 1990s and the 2000s, and how these industries would visually narrate war after 9/11. The high-tech weapons' points of view made famous during the Persian Gulf War were previewed in the interfaces of the arcade shooters of the 1980s that transformed digital crosshairs into the focal points for their militarized gameplay. But missing from these mediated subjectivities was any narrative that contextualized the on-screen destruction. Defense officials and reporters had to make sense of the pixilated video images on the nightly news, just as arcade patrons had to fabricate stories for their ludic firefights. But this narrative absence would disappear in immersive video games with the development of the first-person shooter.

Having matured during the intervening years between the wars in the Gulf, today's first-person shooter games bear only a passing resemblance to their pixilated and cartoonish forbearers (games like the aforementioned *Doom* and *Quake*) thanks to

considerable advances in gaming technologies (e.g., faster 3D engines, higher resolution graphics, high speed internet connectivity, advanced artificial intelligence), including faithfully rendered game assets that are modeled after actual weapons, locales, and physics.

Figures 1.10 and 1.11: War media utilize the same visual lexicon. Soldiers and gamers breach doorways in the real world[43] (L) and in *Medal of Honor* (2010)[44] (R)

Despite these technological upgrades, the FPS's two foundational structures – its perspective ("first-person") and its activity ("shooter") – remain stalwart generic features over its evolution, and help explain the genre's popularity and affective hold. Andrew Kurtz (2002) explains how these structures work together to personalize gameplay:

> Seeing the game's world through the eyes of the protagonist, the player negotiates the gaming space as he would in any computer game, through an input control such as a keyboard, mouse, or joystick. To create an even more seamless first-person environment, the player typically sees a representation of the protagonist's hands, most often armed with a range of selectable weaponry, protruding into video space from the bottom of the player's screen, roughly at hip-level relative to the protagonist's/player's "eyes." From this perspective the player moves the protagonist through a series of environments, ranging from simple room-based

[43] Image from: http://www.defense.gov/dodcmsshare/homepagephoto/2009-06/hires_090605-F-8757F-030c.jpg
[44] Image from: http://www.blogcdn.com/www.joystiq.com/media/2010/02/moh5-2182010-580px.jpg

> mazes as in *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Pathways Into Darkness*, to more complex outdoor environments as in the *Marathon* and *Half Life* series of games. Given varying degrees of narrative complexity, the ultimate goal in the first-person shooter is to traverse from point A to point B, ridding the environment of the enemies which inhabit it. (p. 113)

As a textual apparatus, the first-person shooter foregrounds the player's as an agent of change in that diegetic universe. As a narrative vehicle, the format transforms those choices into key nodal points for the development of its personalized war story.

Let us return to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. By this point in gaming history, first-person shooters had matured as a genre and were regularly supplementing their complex spatial designs with an array of customizable gameplay options and, as importantly, compelling narratives that contextualized the on-screen violence. The Department of Defense made a similar realization concerning its management of war information. No longer content to only release sanctioned images and videos of their technologies and warriors in press briefings as they had during the Persian Gulf War, the Defense Department selected choice reporters to accompany its fighting men and women into Iraq during its "liberation." These reporters did not necessarily present viewers with any more spectacular images of war than had been seen previously. However, embedded journalists did succeed in delivering live images of themselves in Iraq as a means for American audiences to identify with the war effort (Mirzoeff [2005]). To be clear: it is unlikely that design innovations in the commercial games market influenced war planners' policy decisions facilitating embedded combat journalism. Nevertheless, it remains a remarkable fact of our twenty-first century media environment that the traits long-associated with war cinema, i.e., spectacular, kinesthetic visuals and gripping

narratives of personal heroism, had migrated to the daily reporting practices of cable news shows and the design of FPS war games. As is argued by the media and war scholars cited earlier, the underlying reason for this resemblance in the narrative design of combat media is due to the changing nature of war during the early post-Cold War period, including the prevailing political anxieties and the warfighting technologies that were supposed to quell those fears.

FROM THE FIRST-PERSON TO THE *FIRST-PERSONAL* SHOOTER

One of this book's guiding tenets is that the modality and meanings of video games are socially constructed and negotiated along numerous sites – inside and outside of the gaming text – from cover art, to level design, to news coverage (King and Krzywiska 2006; Jones, 2008). Another one of this work's foundational premises is that as techno-cultural artifacts, games cannot help but to reflect their moment and mode of production. Meaningful cultural criticism about gameplay must accordingly make sense of titles' creative designs as well as their broader social and political contexts. Modality, as it has been argued, is a generative term for assessing how games are broadly understood as representing reality; or how gameplay is "situated in relation to what is understood to be the real world" (King, 2008, p. 53). Modality is also useful for thinking through how the form operates as a textual apparatus for transporting players to another experiential realm – to another time and place, to a "magic circle." This is the second resonance of the chapter's key term, and the one that will be examined presently and across the next two chapters. The game comparison that follows is a preamble to the

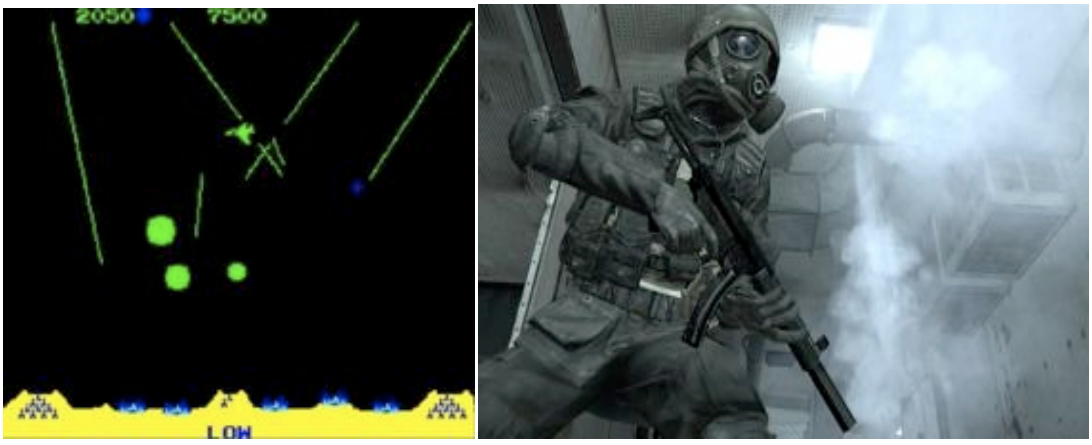
following chapters' deeper textual analyses that seek to explain how these popular militainment transport gamers to other experiential realms.

Looking at two popular shooters side-by-side that were produced decades apart should clarify the interrelated issues of modality-as-reality-claims and modality-as-transport by revealing how gaming platforms' differing capabilities to represent and commodify conflict create pleasures that are both historically specific (reflecting extant technologies and cultural concerns), *and* aesthetic structures that transcend their eras (reflecting enduring medium-specific traits). The following diachronic evaluation of two shooters is necessarily limited in scope and is not intended to represent all of the video games of their respective eras (the arcade shooters of the 1980s, or the first-person shooter games of the 2000s). Nevertheless, the Cold War's *Missile Command* (1980) and the War on Terror's *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) are emblematic titles of their respective gaming epochs, and offer a dramatic comparative snapshot for appreciating how gameplay modality changes alongside technologies' computational abilities, which in turn shapes their ability to create pleasurable ludic war experiences.

When placed side-by-side, the arcade classic *Missile Command* (1980) and *Call of Duty 4* (2007) bear little similarity. The former game, which Atari modeled closely after its 1978 hit *Space Invaders* (Blumenthal, 1980, p.180), presents the player with a pixilated and flat world populated exclusively by six cities and three missile defense stations. The player, whose view of this world remains fixed from a single, unflinching point of view, is tasked with protecting these cities from incoming missiles that increase in number and aggression as the levels progress. There is no way for the player to finally

complete the game, because, at some point, the gamer will lose her cities to the overwhelming barrage of in-coming rockets. This arcade favorite contains no music soundtrack, no video clips conveying a narrative background story (explaining, for instance, why the player is under attack), and there is no means of changing one's point of view within this stark, two-dimensional world. A *Newsweek* magazine piece colorfully describes the arcade classic as follows:

> If there is one game that requires the "right stuff," this is it. Your mission is to protect six cities by destroying enemy missiles with missiles of your own. Your arsenal includes three separate bases for launching your counterattack, each with its own control button; a fourth control aims your shots. As the war progresses, the enemy gets faster and more accurate—he (*sic*) even throws a few "smart Tombs" (*sic*) your way. One good strategy: saturate the air with a line of explosions to absorb the first wave of enemy fire, then block subsequent offensives with smaller bursts. As long as at least one of your cities survives, the game will continue. *Missile Command* graphics are lively and colorful. Video warriors especially enjoy the machine's victory celebration. The screen explodes into red and triumphantly flashes an epitaph for civilization as we know it: "The End." Any teen-ager who regularly scores above 100,000 should be required to submit his name and address to the U.S. Air Force. (Gelman, 1982, p. 92)



Figures 1.12 and 1.13: *Missile Command* (1980) (L), and *Call of Duty 4* (2007) (R)

By contrast, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (examined in the following chapter and again in Chapter Four) is a photo-realistic game that places the player in the midst of frantic firefights using a variety of weapons, equipment, and vehicles. Throughout the game's multiple story-driven levels, the gamer plays as different soldiers along numerous war fronts. *Call of Duty 4*'s production value is on par with Hollywood films, and this shooter has been lauded for its engrossing story, riveting score, and its numerous gameplay modes (including a wildly popular multiplayer setting). Given these considerable visual, aural, and gameplay differences, what could these titles possibly have in common? Do they both engender ludic war experiences? And if so, how?

In her influential and prescient *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), Janet Murray describes cyberdrama's (a category that includes video games) three foremost aesthetic structures – immersion, agency, and transformation – that engender user pleasures. Murray's concepts, when applied to *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty 4*, reveal how design strategies for representing and simulating war have changed alongside advances in computer graphics, artificial intelligence, and processing power, in addition to reflecting the artistic and creative possibilities that attend to those innovations. At the same time, video games typically strive to realize Murray's three structures as best they can, which gives games a historically transcendent design continuity despite the form's considerable technological changes over these same years. The admittedly limited comparison that follows should be viewed in light of the previous section's argument about the contextual, discursive aspects of media modality, and how techno-cultural structures necessarily condition notions of realism in war games.

Immersion

Murray's first category, *immersion*, or the experience of being transported to a simulated realm, is not strictly a technological feat, but is a co-creation of player and text. She contends that because we want to experience immersion, "we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience," and that digital environments present users with "new opportunities to practice this active creation of belief" (Murray, 1997, p. 110-111). (As the Introduction notes, Murray is among those new media critics dissatisfied with how interactivity is typically discussed in strictly technological terms). Key instruments in fostering these processes of belief building are the creation of space and story. Moreover, the avatar, or the gamer's primary representation in the mediated world, is a linchpin element that unites diegetic game spaces and game stories (I return to these points in Chapter Three's examination of the Tom Clancy-brand shooters).

The construction of space and story are wholly different in *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty 4*, and thus directly affect how the games are experienced. For example, in *Call of Duty 4*, the player moves her soldier (who may be any number of characters in the single-player game) through three-dimensional spaces overcoming a variety of physical and tactical obstacles, and must cooperate with non-player characters to defeat terrorists in a number of near-real scenarios. In *Missile Command*, the player moves and aims a reticle at the cascading rockets over several vulnerable, two-dimensional megalopolis. There is no personalized avatar, or any human form in this game because of the era's computational limitations. Video game scholar Mark J.P. Wolf (2003) argues, like

Murray, that the player-character is among the most important screen elements in video games, and that player-characters are either "surrogate-based" (there is a third-person view of one's avatar) or "implied" (you may share the character's perspective as in a first-person shooter game, or there may only be a manageable interface for interacting with the world as in the *Civilization* or *SimCity* games) (p.50).

While the two war games handle space and narrative differently, the player's foremost screen proxy in both *Call of Duty 4* and the abstracted *Missile Command* are crosshairs. These "implied player-characters" are informational markers that tell gamers where their gunshots (in *Call of Duty*) or surface-to-air rockets (in *Missile Command*) will strike. According to Wolf:

> The player-character surrogate in the video game is, in a very concrete sense, the external object into which the player is absorbed, which receives the player's will to activity. This may help to explain why the majority of player-character surrogates in video games are character-based. (2003, p. 60)

It is a remarkable achievement, indeed, that first-person shooters (like the *Call of Duty* games) can cultivate such immersive environments, and develop such detailed but implied player-characters without having to literally represent that figure in third-person (as one would with a surrogate player-character – think Sonic the Hedgehog, or the combatants from the *Street Fighter* series). The implied player-character at the center of the first-person shooter experience is a testament to these games' engrossing spatial designs and narrative artistry. By contrast, there are few elements hailing the implied player-character in *Missile Command* as an embodied defense operator in that 2D world: there are no drill sergeants yelling at the player to aim better, no cinematic scenes

relaying a dramatic backstory, and no fellow humans inhabiting the world. And because *Missile Command* is without immersive elements like narrative and 3D space that interpellate the gamer as a diegetic being, the arcade shooter's collective abstracted modality markers engender a comparatively less affecting ludic war experience.[45]

Agency

Murray's second cyberdramatic structure is agency, or the "satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (1997, p. 126). Agency is at the heart of the interactivity definition debates, and is the key characteristic that gives new media its participatory quality; agency puts the "play" in "gameplay." With respect to most war games, agency is generally expressed and manifested in terms of moving and shooting. But meaningful gameplay is more than just seeing one's joystick movements or mouse clicks on screen. As Murray notes:

> Agency, then, goes beyond both participation and activity. As an aesthetic pleasure, as an experience to be savored for its own sake, it is offered to a limited degree in traditional art forms but is more commonly available in the structured activities we call games. Therefore, when we move narrative to a computer, we move it to a realm already shaped by the structures of games. (1997, p. 129)

[45] Of course, immersion proper is not predicated solely on graphical representation. Nick Muntfort's *Twisty Little Passages* (2005) documents how text adventures and role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons can be extremely immersive. Abstraction in video games, as Wolf (2003) observes, can be quite engrossing and mentally stimulating as well since the players mentally fill in the representational gaps. In a horrifying realization of this, *Missile Command*'s own programmer, Dave Theurer, had nightmares for half a year following the game's production (Barkan, 2004, p. 140).

The reason that games, and especially narrative-driven games, excel at promoting a sense of agency is because the structured activity gives players prompts for meaningful role-playing and opportunities for exercising intentionality and choice in a fictional world.[46]

The most common game type and – not incidentally – the earliest form of narrative are "agon, or [the] contest between opponents" (Murray, 1997, p. 145). This is why, according to Murray, the "simple shoot-'em-up videogame…belongs to the extremely broad dramatic tradition that gives us both the boxing match and the Elizabethan revenge play" (1997, p. 145). *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty 4* are likewise part of that same contest tradition; the gamer staves off an unseen opponent's missile volleys in one, and eliminates terrorists in close-quarters combat in the other. Murray continues: "Because guns and weaponlike (*sic*) interfaces offer such easy immersion and such a direct sense of agency and because violent aggression is so strong a part of human nature, shoot-'em-ups are here to stay. But that does not mean that simplistic violence is the limit of the form" (1997, p. 146). We should add that simplistic violence is also not the limit of the genre. And though long-hamstrung with simplistic representations of violence, all war games are not *de facto* "shoot-'em-ups" (although, some combat games certainly deserve the pejorative label). Martial violence figures prominently in both games, and agency is exercised primarily at the business ends of their virtual guns. But that obvious observation misses a larger point. The virtual gunfire means something different in each game because of the surrounding narrative structures,

[46] Gameplay actions and existential thought share numerous concerns: player freedom, intentionality, contextual affordances, and experiential flow, among others. For an exploratory discussion regarding these similarities, see Payne, 2009a.

aesthetics, and play contexts. For example, there is a detailed and complex journey story afoot in *Call of Duty 4* that gives narrative and ethical motivation to the in-game actions (again, even if those actions largely center around shooting). "One of the consistent pleasures of the journey story in every time and every medium is the unfolding of solutions to seemingly impossible situations" (Murray, 1997, p. 138). There is no such narrative framework in *Missile Command*, making it a less personalized virual war experience than games with narratives.

The gunplay is predictably different in these military shooters as well. In *Missile Command*, the player-turned-defense operator can neither traverse space (change their shooting perspective) nor change weapons. As the levels progress, the player is charged with becoming more accurate and efficient with the limited ammunition shot from their single firing position. Even veteran gamers must eventually sacrifice their cities to the incoming rocket barrage. The ending in *Missile Command* is always the same; no matter the player's skill, there will be a nuclear apocalypse with every quarter dropped into the arcade cabinet. *Call of Duty* players, meanwhile, deploy a variety of guns for a variety of strategic ends: from using shotguns in close-quarters combat, to firing rocket launchers to eliminate enemy vehicles, to using silenced sniper rifles on surveillance runs. The player must abide by the level's specific dictates – e.g., not shooting teammates and non-combatants, or capturing a specific piece of intelligence – but they are relatively free to engage the opposing force using whatever weapons they have at their disposal. The ability to choose where and when to fire the weapon of one's choosing ties the player's choices to the game's objectives, producing a sense of personal investment in seeing that

the goals are achieved. Let me be clear on this point, as I do not want to overstate my case: it is not that in-game actions are *de facto* signs of player agency or are empirical evidence of interactivity (which they certainly can or could be), it is rather that game actions can be deeply meaningful if the gaming apparatus (again, understood broadly) creates an environment that reinforces the fiction of the synthetic world, and connects to gamers' lived experiences. Thus, the Cold War political environment informed the ludic experiences of 1980s arcade-goers playing *Missile Command*, just as the War on Terror colors the gaming experiences of today's *Call of Duty* players. Although the latter game's visual, narrative, and control schemes engender a comparatively complex and customizable (and thus personalized) text, it does not follow that simpler games are unaffecting. Indeed, our liminal states of play can be so immersive and agentive and so personally and profoundly moving – across game mediums and eras – that these experiences can change the way we look at ourselves and the mediated and non-mediated worlds around us, bringing us to Murray's third aesthetic structure.

Transformation

Transformation is Murray's third characteristic pleasure of cyberdrama and digital realms, and it refers to interactive media's ability to offer users multiple imaginary roles and opportunities to see a process (or set of processes) unfold in varying ways. "In computer games we do not settle for one life, or even for one civilization; when things go wrong or when we just want a different version of the same experience, we go back for a replay" (Murray, 1997, p. 135). The ability to immerse oneself into a synthetic world and act on objects, thereby transforming that space and/or its stories to varying degrees, and

to do so over the course of multiple journeys is an immensely pleasurable sensation that is rarely available (or as available) in other media arts. Murray argues: "Because the computer is a procedural medium, it does not just describe or observe behavioral patterns, the way printed text or moving photography does; it embodies and executes them. And as a participatory medium, it allows us to collaborate in the performance" (1997, p. 181). By participating in the game's processes and algorithmic procedures, we become part of the game, part of the story. Murray wisely cautions that this personal attachment and performed enactment is not some neutral state of being, but that embodied experiences can contribute to the social good or collective ill. Regrettably, there are those video games that quite purposefully trade in gross representations, drawing the ire of politicians, activists, and players.[47] However, there are also video games that are used to train and educate users on a variety of subjects (e.g., the "serious games movement"), and some modified military titles are even used to treat soldiers' cases of post-traumatic stress disorder. Educational games are but one example that transformation, like media interactivity generally, is not a strictly technological event.

Games are a potentially transformative medium because they allow us to consider the ramifications for a variety of actions, many of which are regularly denied to us in real life. One of the foremost war game events is killing others and experiencing our own deaths. Given all that has been said about *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty 4*, it is not

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[47] These games are an ugly but real part of video game history. Two of the more infamous titles are Atari's *Custer's Revenge* [1982] where the player gets points for raping a captive Native American while dodging arrows, and the Flash-based internet game, *Border Patrol* [no date], has the player shooting Mexican stereotypes like the "Mexican Nationalist," "Drug Smuggler," and the "Breeder" before they enter the States.

surprising that they too differ with how they represent the gamer's demise. In her popular *Joystick Nation* (1997), video game critic and historian J.C. Herz recalls her feelings around one's inevitable defeat in *Missile Command*. Herz's reflection speaks to the paradoxical pleasures of knowing when and how one meets their virtual maker.

> The most intense thing about *Missile Command*, though, was this weird crazy moment near the end, when the ICBMs were raining down and you knew you were just about to lose it, that was totally euphoric. Because you knew that you were going to die, that you were within second of everything going black. You're gonna die in three seconds. You're gonna die at this instant. You're dying. You're dead. And then you get to watch all the pretty explosions. And after the fireworks display, you get to press the restart button, and you're alive again, until the next collision with your own mortality. You're not just playing with colored lights. You're playing with the concept of death. (Herz, 1997, p. 64)

Missile Command, which "originally grew out of a military simulation to see how many nuclear warheads a human radar operator could track before overload set in" (Poole, 2000, p. 36), is a remarkable achievement because it played with and effectively commodified the Cold War anxiety of a nuclear holocaust.

Call of Duty 4 also plays with death, but it does so in a more personal manner than *Missile Command* thanks to its immersive narrative and 3D universe. Upon being killed in a multi-player game, the player is treated to a "killcam" replay that shows how that player was killed, and who killed them. Yet *Call of Duty 4*'s most intimate and moving depictions of death are conveyed in its single-player, narrative-driven campaign mode. It is with these depictions of death where the ludic differences between the titles are most pronounced. This final point of comparison also allows prime us to begin thinking about the focus of the following chapters – how contemporary military shooters

model the personal sacrifices (Chapter Two) and political commitments (Chapter Three) that are necessary to wage modern counterinsurgency campaigns.

The *Modern Warfare* games (i.e., *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* [2007] and *Modern Warfare 2* [2009]) are emblematic modern military shooters that model in striking narrative and ludic terms the political need for personal sacrifice. The first death scene of note occurs during the *Call of Duty 4*'s opening credit sequence when the player is located in the body of Yasir Al-Fulani, the fictional President of an unnamed country in the Middle East, during a separatist-led military *coup d'état*. The kidnappers force the player (Al-Fulani) into the backseat of a car and, as the car travels down the city streets, the player sees an urban space ravaged by militants who conduct public executions and home invasions. The player, Al-Fulani, is then drugged before the opposition leader Khaled Al-Asad. Al-Asad addresses a small video camera before turning around to execute the player-character with a pistol in a public square.

Figures 1.14 and 1.15: The player-character's views of death during their televised execution (L), and from nuclear fallout (R) in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*

The second scene of note occurs immediately after the gamer's helicopter, who is then playing as U.S. Marine Sergeant Paul Jackson, is knocked out of the sky by an exploding nuclear device. When the player-character awakens, he stumbles from the wreckage to find a decimated and irradiated Middle Eastern city devoid of life. The player only has a few moments to explore the wasteland before he too dies of his wounds.

The player is powerless to do anything but to bear witness to their virtual deaths in these levels. Even the seemingly ever-present guns of this first-person shooter game are absent, and with them, the player's ability to intervene in these sequences. These moments are also especially powerful because they are told through the first-person perspective. Alexander Galloway (2006) rightly notes how the protracted first-person view (not a quick glance-object cut) operates differently in film than it does in games: "Where film uses the subjective shot to represent a problem with identification, games use the subjective shot to *create* identification" (emphasis in original, p. 69). In these two moments, players see – in as intimate a manner as is possible – the circumstances and causes of their deaths: they see their executioner's gun, and the mushroom cloud from ground zero. These two scenes are viscerally affecting and are, ironically, potentially personally transformative moments precisely because they present fates that the gamer cannot escape; they are scripted events that are technically non-transformative. This curious design choice, which is examined in closer detail next chapter, inverts and short-circuits the agency and transformation typically enjoyed in military shooter games. The absence of technological transformation – such as these death scenes – does not foreclose

absolutely the potential for personal transformation. After all, like agency and immersion, transformation is not some impersonal aesthetic structures or technological activity. Rather, these three aesthetic structures of cyberdrama wield their affective power by interfacing and interacting with players and their extant cultural concerns, including topical elements like non-state terrorists and WMDs.

Missile Command and *Call of Duty 4* play differently with anxieties about an outside nuclear attack, be it by an unseen aggressor or a non-state terrorist group. The games' differing depictions of their player-characters' deaths are symptomatic of the platforms' technological capabilities, and are a singular but telling example of how ludic war's textual strategies change over time, even as war games' thematic concerns and video games' aesthetic structures endure. Twenty-first century shooters offer players affecting gameplay experiences that are produced by immersive environments, photo-realistic visuals, engrossing narratives, complex avatar controls, and digital worlds that can be transformed again and again – points that will be examined in greater detail in the following chapters. I do not wish to suggest that games like *Call of Duty 4* engender a qualitatively *better* ludic war experience than more graphically abstract games like *Missile Command*. These are, however, most certainly *different* wars. Literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) strikes this useful distinction between games across eras:

> Through the increasing attention devoted to the sensorial representation of the game-world, the pleasure of modern games is as much a matter of 'being there' as a matter of 'doing things.' From a strategic point of view the newer games (*Doom*, *Myst*, or *Quake*) are not superior to the old ones (*PacMan* or *Tetris*), but they are infinitely more immersive. (p. 309)

That is, while one game is not more inherently artistic than the other, *Call of Duty 4*'s realized rendering and telling of an interactive war story speaks more forcefully to post-9/11 cultural anxieties than *Missile Command*'s non-narrative (or spectacle-based) gameplay does to the Cold War crisis because the former is, ultimately, a more aesthetically and technologically sophisticated piece of media. Modern shooters' heightened degrees of immersion, agency, and transformation engender complex textual experiences, and thus offer richer objects of study for the current investigation. The changes in how ludic war is produced – from classic arcade shooters like *Missile Command* to multi-million dollar, multi-platform titles like *Call of Duty 4* – represent the ludic transition from the first-person to the *first-personal* shooter, and explains why the gameplay modality of military shooters resonates with the political anxieties spawned by postmodern war in ways that other war entertainment does not, or perhaps, cannot.

TOWARDS A NEW MODALITY OF LUDIC WAR PLAY

> The towers are gone now, reduced to bloody rubble, along with all hopes for Peace in Our Time, in the United States or any other country. Make no mistake about it: We are At War now – with somebody – and we will stay At War with that mysterious Enemy for the rest of our lives.
>
> -- famed "gonzo journalist" Hunter S. Thompson (2001) writing the day after the 9/11 attacks

Cultural producers have had difficulty selling entertainment products about the War on Terror due to disenchanted attitudes with the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a persistent suspicion of postmodern war media generally. Military shooters' prodigious sales are an exception to this trend, suggesting that games offer

experiences that are qualitatively different than those found in other mediums (despite possessing similar imagery and themes). This chapter has outlined the political anxieties that haunt depictions of postmodern warfare and how the video game's modality of play offers users ways of interacting pleasurably with the popular war imaginary.

Modality, as this chapter has employed the term, is a message's connection to what is understood to be the real world, and media modality is a communicative form's medium-specific ability to convey a sense of ontological reality or unreality. Fictional media convey their truths differently because their medium-specific modality markers work in concert to affect us in varying ways. In turn, users' reactions to how a message or story is depicted produces modality judgments about the representational abilities and limitations of the communicative form itself. Media modality and notions of realism are part of an interconnected, historically contingent, and fluctuating discursive field that is always subject to debate and contestation.

The pleasures of playing video games are inextricably linked to issues of media modality, including: the prevailing notions about the interactive form itself, a given title's game technics, mechanics, and narrative, and the manner in which these contextual and textual modality issues interact with one another. Contemporary military shooters succeed in the marketplace where other war entertainment fail because the games respond forcefully to the postmodern war's political crisis of meaning by granting players opportunities to fight virtually in wars resembling the ones they see in moving-image entertainment and in news coverage. These affecting, medium-specific textual pleasures

are a consequence of the modern war shooter's immersive visuals and narrative design, and its controllable on-screen action.

Gaming's textual modality facilitates an experiential transport that clearly overlaps with Murray's aesthetic structures. Yet, as it is hopefully now clear, immersion, agency, and transformation (and any other underlying structures) should not be thought of as operating alone or understood outside of history. The modality of context reminds us that media users wield technology in specific settings and thus experience these aesthetic structures at a historical moment. Any holistic consideration of gaming's pleasures must be evaluated in light of the contextual modality of media because it is the situational canvas against which any virtual play is ultimately understood. Modality-as-discourse complements analytically Murray's aesthetic structures by emphasizing that it is the operation of a text in a lived context that ultimately determines how pleasurable media are or can be, including military-themed games.

Modality and Murray's three aesthetic structures of inform but do not structure explicitly the following two chapters' analyses. Chapter Two analyzes how the first-person perspective embeds gamers in multiple storylines in the famed *Modern Warfare* series, and in doing so, models a militarized vision of "sacrificial citizenship" that is a component of the post-9/11 American political identity (Murray's immersion). And Chapter Three assesses the way Tom Clancy's best-selling shooter franchises grant players control over near-future weapon systems and communication technologies (Murray's agency), and give players opportunities to save the homeland through the strategic conquest of terrorized, domestic spaces (Murray's transformation), both of

which perpetuate a politically conservative vision of American exceptionalism. (Chapter Four also investigates modality, but it moves away from the game text to analyze how contextual understandings of violent, militarized gameplay inform the marketing efforts behind the first *Modern Warfare* title).

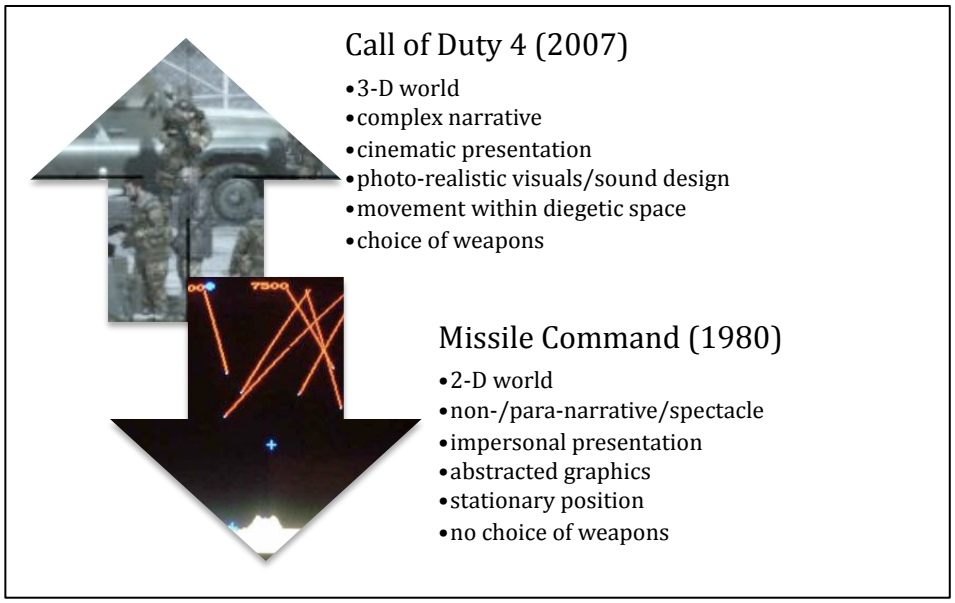

Figure 1.16: Differing design technics and degrees of personalized gameplay modalities in *Call of Duty 4* and *Missile Command*

The foregoing comparison of *Missile Command* to *Call of Duty 4* is neither intended to gloss over the multitude of technology and game design innovations that have occurred over the three decades separating these titles, nor should it be inferred that less complex games are unable to engender lasting and affecting responses. Instead, the side-by-side textual evaluation illustrates how media modality – in both of its usages – presents researchers with a means of tracking the "moving target" that is ludic war and its pleasures. *Missile Command*'s highly pixilated and impersonal battlescape looks nothing

like *Call of Duty*'s intimately presented, near-future war story. Yet the games possess structural components that put them in a historic, industrial, and aesthetic dialog (i.e., they are in the same militainament quadrant in Fig. 1.5). Media modality reminds us that there are, after all, important affective and technological continuities of form between these dissimilar shooters. As Murray (1997) rightly observes: "These pleasures [those emerging from immersion, agency, and transformation] are in some ways continuous with the pleasures of traditional media and in some ways unique. Certainly the combination of pleasures, like the combination of properties of the digital medium itself, is completely novel" (p. 181). Appearances to the contrary, these two shooters' foundational gameplay elements give them a greater formal affinity to one another than either of them have with cinematic or TV war entertainment.

Missile Command's story-less and pixilated depiction of a nuclear Cold War turned hot is abstracted; its narrative – such as it is – is clearly allegorical. The game invites the player to spend quarter after quarter to see how long they can defer the inevitable apocalypse while imagining what such a future might look like. Despite its simple presentation, *Missile Command*'s abstracted war nevertheless produces lasting visions of Cold War destruction (as Seth Barkan's poetry attests). *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is not allegorical, however. It is hauntingly and graphically specific.

We must remember that in addition to generating compelling affect for individual players in narrative campaigns (or gamers in multiplayer sessions), these shooters also wield popular, global influence. This is how modality-as-transport (this chapter's second definition of modality) reconnects with modality-as-reality (the first understanding of

modality). The shooters examined in this and in the following chapters enjoy a certain received wisdom regarding the righteousness of American military interventions, in large part, because these commercial ventures are *not* government produced. These games wield what Joseph Nye (1990, 2003, 2004) calls "soft power" because they are not considered to be government propaganda:

> Soft power is the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals. It differs from hard power, the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will. Both hard and soft power are important in the war on terrorism, but attraction is much cheaper than coercion, and an asset that needs to be nourished. (2003, Para. 2)

Gameplay modality therefore – understood simultaneously as claims about reality and as a form of textual transport – unequivocally demonstrates that the soft power of fiction can operate in the service of the hard power of the state. The next two chapters further unpack this connection by examining, first, how the *Modern Warfare* franchise's immersive perspective and complex narratives produce a mode of personalized subjectivity that justifies the sacrifice of soldiers and citizens on behalf of the post-9/11 state; and, then, how Tom Clancy's tactical shooters argue to the world why America must take the military lead in the twenty-first century by showcasing the dire consequences of its failure to act swiftly, unilaterally, and if need be preemptively.

Chapter Two

The First-Personal Shooter: Narrative Subjectivity & Sacrificial Citizenship in the *Modern Warfare* Series

> True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside. It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe.
>
> -- from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990, p. 78)

INTRODUCTION

I argued last chapter that the video game's modality of play enables it to respond in medium-specific ways to the numerous anxieties – political, cultural, existential, etc. – introduced by postmodern conflict, and especially for those military operations conducted during the post-Cold War years. I also argued that the interactive entertainment industry's generational changes in gaming technology and design innovations have shaped cultural producers' techniques when commodifying warfare. The game industry's drive towards crafting ever-more affecting and personalized ludic war experiences vis-à-vis increased degrees of agency, immersion, and transformation, have resulted in a changing intimacy and personalization of players' ludic subjectivities over this same time; representing the transition from the first-person to the first-*personal* shooter.

The current chapter turns its attention to better understanding the manner by which the military shooter cultivates the textual attractions of its mediated subjectivity. The first-person shooter, more so than any other war game format or genre, allows

gamers to *interface* with a counterinsurgency imaginary that they can only bear witness to in other militainment. I choose the word interface purposefully for several reasons. For one, interface denotes the general way that games play with popular notions of warfare (e.g., strategies, rationales, policies, themes, narratives, visual tropes), as well those digitized control interfaces of modern weapons systems (e.g., video shots from aerial vehicles and "smart" weaponry). A second reason for emphasizing the term is because of the specific manner by which the *Modern Warfare* games (*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and *Modern Warfare 2*) locate the gamer in the virtual boots of numerous soldier-avatars across their narratives. In playing through the games' single-player campaign modes as these soldiers, the gamer becomes the narrative interface or a virtual interlocutor, connecting the fictional soldiers' separate stories of heroism, deceit, and sacrifice in this best-selling multi-part series. The games' changing perspectives give the player a uniquely transcendental view of the martial action that responds to the major dilemmas of postmodern war discussed last chapter: its perspectival distances and political meaninglessness.

The gameplay modality that dominates the *Modern Warfare* series is that of the skilled soldier. However, the two *Modern Warfare* titles are particularly noteworthy for placing players in different war theaters as soldiers *and* civilians who fight and die. These shifting points of view engender a paradoxical virtual subjectivity that is at once situated in individual battles, and one that transcends space and time. This interpersonal modality of war play models for the player the "sacrificial citizenship" that has come to characterize post-9/11 American political identity – one that hails all US citizens as *de*

facto conscripts for a war that may demand, at any moment, the greatest of personal sacrifices.

This chapter begins by arguing that the game industry's push towards crafting a personalized narrative subjectivity resonates with the U.S.'s counterinsurgency doctrine. I then analyze how the *Modern Warfare* titles, in narrating their fictional war stories, engender a virtualized sacrificial citizenship that connects recent post-9/11 war efforts to a Cold War past. By granting players intimate battlefield views and performative liberties not afforded by other "war fare" – including simulating the gamer's own death – the series engenders empathetic bonds between the gamer and its sacrificial avatars.

THE NARRATIVE SUBJECTIVITY OF COUNTERINSURGENCY

Technology ruled the day during the first Persian Gulf War. Saddam Hussein's troops and armored divisions were routed easily by the overwhelming power of the U.S.'s networked forces and advanced weapons systems spawned by the post-Cold War's Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). The RMA (or, as it is sometimes called "the Transformation" – which receives additional attention in the next chapter on Clancy-brand games) maintains that the U.S. armed forces could become swifter and more powerful by leveraging advances in communication and computer technologies as a force multiplier in conventional warfare. This was not the case for the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan however as these conventional technologies were proven insufficient and ineffective when faced with non-state terrorists' asymmetrical tactics. The RMA

eventually gave way to Counterinsurgency as a defense strategy, which downplayed the role of technology and emphasized instead the role of culture in winning wars.[48]

Counterinsurgency (or COIN as it is known in military and think tank circles) is a military doctrine that calls for the United States to leverage its considerable technological superiority in failed political states (i.e., those harboring terrorists) alongside cultural outreach and nation-building projects with the aim of achieving military and political victory for "the long war".[49] Counterinsurgency is also a distinct ideological lens. It is a way of viewing global conflict and the United States' central place in adjudicating and moderating that conflict. Citing General David Patraeus' famed *Counterinsugency* field manual (2006), which outlines the military and cultural strategies needed to face down threats posed by asymmetrical warfare, Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that COIN presents the long war as nothing less than a global cultural war. He states: "Cultural war, with visuality playing a central role, takes 'culture' as the means, location, and object of warfare … In the era of United States global policing, war is counterinsurgency, and the means of counterinsurgency are cultural. War is culture." (Mirzoeff, 2009, p. 1737). Visuality, like media modality, is as a key concept for understanding how first-person shooters produce their affective experiences and convey beliefs about U.S. warfighting.

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[48] Despite their different emphases, the RMA remains the progenitor of Counterinsurgency; "Counterinsurgency is the permanent continuation of the RMA" (Mirzoeff, 2009, p. 1738).

[49] The term "the long war" – which initially referred to the protracted battle against non-state terrorists in the wake of 9/11 – has since been used in a variety of popular and military publications, though some officials dislike its connotation with the previous and most recent long war – the Cold War. See *Unfolding the Future of the Long War* (2008) by Christopher Perin et al. of the RAND Corporation for an extended discussion concerning the term's definitional challenges.

Visuality is a historically specific and contingent mode of vision; or, perhaps a more useful phrasing for our purposes, visuality is a kind of media modality. Vision and visuality are related terms, though they are not synonyms. The former is a physical activity; the latter is a cultural and social activity. Vision is the ability to see, whereas "Visuality…[orders and narrates] the chaotic events of modern life in intelligible, visualized fashion" (Mirzoeff, 2006). Visuality is therefore a discourse – it is a way of organizing sights and sounds into a causal order whereby personal sensoria are made intelligible vis-à-vis some interpretive framework. The social construction of visuality makes it, like the modality of media, a site of struggle for meaning and social power.

If war is culture, as Mirzoeff claims, then modern war is more precisely visual culture (see, Virilio, 1989), and postmodern war is simulational culture. The visual modality of the military FPS is the idealized military visuality of simulational culture. This is because games like the *Modern Warfare* series and Tom Clancy-brand shooters model how military-grade technologies function in the post-Cold War era, and they narrate why counterinsurgency interventions are launched or might need to be launched. To call the first-person shooter the *ideal* visual modality of the early twenty-first century is not hyperbole. In fact, Mirzoeff warns us about dismissing the congruencies between counterinsurgency efforts and commercial shooter games. He states:

> In the section of the counterinsurgency manual intended to be read by officers in the field, visuality is defined as the necessity of knowing the map by heart and being able to place oneself in the map at any time. This mapping is fully cognitive, including "the people, topography, economy, history, and culture of their area of operations" (US, Dept of the Army 7-7). The counterinsurgent thus transforms his or her tactical disadvantage into strategic mastery by rendering unfamiliar territory into a simulacrum of the video game's "fully actionable

> space" (Galloway 63). *When soldiers refer to action as being like a video game, as they frequently do, it is not a metaphor.* By turning diverse aspects of foreign life into a single narrative, the counterinsurgent feels in control of the situation as if a player in a first-person shooter video game. The commander thereby feels himself to be in the map, just as the game player is emotively "in" the game. (emphasis added, 2009, p. 1741)

The first-person visuals made famous during the Persian Gulf War were an aesthetic prerequisite to the shooter's immersive visualization of counterinsurgency. But, as was argued last chapter, the key design innovation of the FPS's modality is not some dramatic graphical upgrade or play mechanic – it is the adept creation of *narrative subjectivity*.

Narrative subjectivity and war visualization are inextricably linked concepts. The visualization of war is the ability to see the battlefield in all of its complexity. It involves understanding how various war units interact as one might move knights, rooks, and bishops on a Chessboard. "Visualization is the key leadership tactic that holds together the disparate components of counterinsurgency" (Mirzoeff, 2009, p. 1741). But visualization encompasses more than visuals alone; it is more than dispassionate and quantifiable battlefield tactics. The visualization of war also includes understanding the rationales that motivate military interventions and the risks they pose for "blood and treasure." For shooters like *Modern Warfare* and the Clancy-brand games examined next chapter, the visualization of ludic war means empathizing with soldiers' and civilians' stories of sacrifice that enable America to wield its political power in the new century.

And herein lies the ideologically seductive power of ludic war's gameplay. By linking the gamer's actions with the unfolding counterinsurgency narrative, the war stories on screen – in effect – become the gamer's stories (thanks in no small part to the

aesthetic structures of immersion, agency, and transformation). In the case of the *Modern Warfare* games, because the player experiences these campaigns as different international soldiers engaged in a range of combat activities around the globe, the changing subjectivity – although always experienced from the first-person, gun-toting perspective – further implicates the gamer into the overarching narrative action by engendering a paradoxical vantage point that is at once situated in individual campaigns, while also providing the player with a wider perspective that transcends space, time, and single soldiers' points of view. These changing virtual subjectivities make the gameplay action personal (i.e., the enemy is shooting at me, and I am shooting at them) and interpersonal (i.e., the ability to virtually walk in an avatar's boots, and another, and then another). These interconnected situated and transcendental points of view enable the gamer to make sense of the violent actions that would be morally objectionable were they not able to piece the marital vignettes into some justifiable whole.

Mirzoeff posits that: "Counterinsurgency has become a digitally mediated version of imperialist techniques to produce legitimacy" (2009, p. 1737). Commercial military shooters are a paradigmatic part of this legitimacy-producing cultural effort due to their unique ability to simulate what counterinsurgency efforts might look and feel like. We see this expressed clearly in the *Modern Warfare* games where the gamer plays as multiple characters in its complex narrative, and in the Clancy-brand shooters examined next chapter, where cutting-edge military weapon systems and battlefield tactics promise to protect the homeland from terrorists and perpetuate American exceptionalism as the reigning political belief that informs America's post-9/11 foreign policy doctrines.

As we know from last chapter, the first Gulf War was analogized to graphically abstracted and story-less gamespaces. It was the "Nintendo War." It was an 8-bit war. But the second Gulf War is a mediated event through and through. (*TIME* magazine dubbed the Iraq War the "YouTube War" [Cox, 2006] for its vast array of video depictions created by media firms, soldiers, and civilians that have been posted to the video-sharing site of the same name). Unlike the pixilated and person-less (and often 2-dimensional) battlefields typical of classic gaming titles from the 1980s, the first-person shooters of the 2000s offer immersive and customizable theaters of war. These virtual wars are no 8-bit battles. They are complex, 3D synthetic worlds. They possess soldiers who yell and scream, and bleed and die – only to be digitally resurrected when the levels are replayed. The FPS games of the 2000s fuse complex storytelling with immersive level design, producing a textual modality that promotes a narrativized form of militarized vision – one uniquely equipped to meet the anxieties of conducting war after 9/11. By the time that the U.S. military had returned to Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein in 2003, the first-person shooter was well on its way to presenting players with a new modality of ludic war.

These games were and remain marketplace successes because their photo-realistic visuals and immersive stories sync with what players *believe* combat to look and feel like. Moreover, these narrative and procedural elements engender a vicarious sense of patriotism.[50] Patriotism is not a staid definition as an encyclopedia entry might summarize it, but it is a lived and felt energy. Conservative political philosopher Roger

[50] Note: this is not equivalent to saying that this is what we know war to be like.

Scruton calls patriotism "a *natural* love of country, countrymen (*sic*) and the culture that unites them" (emphasis added, qtd. in Dooley, 2009, p. 158). For Scruton and similarly minded thinkers, patriotism is an essential building block of the nation-state; it is a social bond that unites a nation's imagined community of citizens across space and time. *Modern Warfare* simulates a sense of virtual patriotism through its immersive narratives of personal sacrifice that create a bond between the gamer and the sacrificial soldier or citizen. Remember: counterinsurgency is a powerful policy concept because it theorizes how to face down asymmetrical terroristic threats through the deep appreciation of the tactics, strategies, and *personal costs* extending beyond any single battle. The *Modern Warfare* games model for players the human sacrifices that modern counterinsurgencies demand, and reify the processes by which everyday soldiers and civilian become patriots. The remainder of this chapter examines how this best-selling series generates its affective hold; or to borrow Tim O'Brien's phrase, this chapter will now examine how the *Modern Warfare* games make "the stomach believe."

SACRIFICIAL CITIZENSHIP IN THE *MODERN WARFARE* SERIES

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (2007) was the first game of the storied franchise to deviate from its famed World War II setting. The game was a popular and critical success, selling over 14 million units across multiple consoles, and receiving almost universal praise from game reviewers and critics.[51] Two years later its sequel, titled simply *Modern Warfare 2* (2009), was released to slightly more tepid reviews though

[51] The game reviewers' discourse receives sustained attention in Chapter 3.

greater fanfare – moving over 20 million units.[52] Both *Modern Warfare* games owe much of their success to the franchise's established track record, including popular online multiplayer modes that pit gamers against one another or in teams in fast-paced, objective-oriented matches. The *Modern Warfare* games' single-player narratives – criticized by some game journalists for their relatively short campaigns (each takes about six hours to complete) – are structurally similar to the previous *Call of Duty* installments insofar as they place players in the boots of recurring characters along several war fronts. While this mechanic is hardly novel for the franchise, *Modern Warfare* possesses a textual potency absent from its previous WWII shooters.

In the previous *Call of Duty* games, the gamer plays as international soldiers – American, British, Soviet, Canadian, Polish – fighting in a superbly documented and historic global war. This is not the case for *Modern Warfare*'s fictional, near-future battles. In these games the player's Special Forces soldiers battle to contain a raff of modern-day horrors. Fighting today's non-state terrorists have considerably different resonances than fighting yesteryear's Nazis, and the *Modern Warfare* games tap into prevailing anxieties in ways that the WWII shooters cannot. This is reflected in the games' contextual modality issues (some of which were covered last chapter). For instance, WWII gameplay concerns largely revolve around issues of historical accuracy (as King and Krzywinska rightly note): did the battle unfold in this manner, and are these uniforms and weapons accurately rendered? This is not the foremost contextual modality concern for titles daring to model near-future conflicts. WWII is generally thought to be

[52] These sales numbers were tabulated in June 2010.

beyond moral suspicion. This is not the case for the War on Terror. The concern for these contemporary titles is instead: is it morally permissible to play war games that invoke the contemporary war imaginary? *Modern Warfare* and similar games commodifying the War on Terror must make a special effort to justify repeatedly the sacrifice of American lives. And, by extension, the games must also justify that playing with these concerns is likewise permissible. The *Modern Warfare* games make their textual justifications in dramatic fashion.

The *Modern Warfare* single-player campaigns contain serpentine storylines and numerous characters that make an elegant summarization difficult. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) centers on the multi-front counterinsurgency efforts of the British Special Air Service (SAS), a Special Forces unit of the British Army, and the American United States Marine Corps (USMC) in tamping down an international conspiracy waged by Russian Ultranationalists and Islamic separatists operating in an unnamed Middle Eastern country. Led by Imran Zakhaev, the Russian Ultranationalists have financed a military *coup d'état* in that unnamed country, allowing Khaled Al-Asad and his Islamic insurgents to overthrow the local government. The American forces invade the Middle Eastern country to capture or kill Al-Asad, while the British forces pursue his Russian financiers. The gamer plays as different SAS and UMSC soldiers attempting to return the Middle Eastern country to its elected leadership and prevent Zakhaev's group from launching nuclear-armed ICBMs at the United States. The game ends when a joint USMC and SAS task force kills Zakhaev and detonates the nuclear ICBMs over the Atlantic.

The events of *Modern Warfare 2* (2009) begin a few years after the first, once Imran Zakhaev has been lionized as a political martyr and the Ultranationalists have gained control of the Russian government. The player again assumes control of American and British soldiers in multiple theaters of war – this time, as part of "Task Force 141," a multi-national counter-terrorist unit, and the U.S. Army Rangers. Vladimir Makarov, one of Zakhaev's former lieutenants, has been spearheading numerous terrorist attacks across Europe, and succeeds in framing an American special agent in a civilian massacre at a Russian airport. This heinous act prompts Russia into declaring war on the United States. Task Force 141 is charged with traversing the globe for evidence that will exonerate the United States in the airport massacre, while the Rangers defend Virginia and Washington D.C. against invading Russian forces. After a series of plot twists which reveal American and Russian military leaders to be duplicitous, power-hungry warmongers, the Rangers preserve Washington D.C., and Task Force 141 eliminates the traitorous military leaders.

In the game's "post-mortem" (a review of a project's development history), *Call of Duty 4*'s lead designer Zied Rieke and technical art director Michael Boon discuss the creative liberties that the Infinity Ward game studio took with the first *Modern Warfare*'s story. The designers state:

> Modern-day warfare is very emotional for people, which is both good and bad. We really wanted to avoid referencing any current, real wars, and one aspect of the gameplay that we didn't want to change from previous titles was the idea of two large opposing forces with similar numbers and technology. To facilitate that, we invented a war with several fronts, primarily involving a group splintered from the Russian army, with a secondary front in the Middle East. (2008, p. 25)

They continue later:

> Story is something we've always put a little effort into, but by and large we've prioritized it below other aspects of our games. Moving away from WWII and into a fictional war removed that option. We spent hours brainstorming with military advisors, trying to come up with a credible scenario that would involve a large-scale war, and then weeks interviewing writers to find someone who could help us craft a narrative that would draw the player in. The result, while not Shakespearean, has drawn almost universal praise. We feel like we have a new skill, and we intend to build on it in our future projects. (2008, p. 26)

It is certainly debatable whether or not the first game's story represents a "credible scenario," and *Modern Warfare 2*'s sensational narrative stretches the credibility of this claim even further. However, the designers correctly assert that: "Modern warfare is very different from more traditional warfare in that direct confrontations between huge armies are relatively rare. Instead, you have a huge variety of different types of low-intensity conflicts and special forces missions" (Rieke and Boon, 2008, p. 25). The titles re-imagine a counterinsurgency wherein the fighting is between Western nations and their well-funded and well-organized enemies. That is, the two sides in this fictional war function as military equals (which typically do not have direct, asymmetrical warfare, though they will engage in indirect or proxy warfare as was the case during the Cold War). The choice to set military equals against one another in the current era is an adroit slight of hand that enables the player's virtual war experience to be politically satisfying (i.e., the enemy is an equally matched adversary), and at the same time, resemble the smaller-scale engagements players have come to expect from post-Cold War interventions. In actuality, the game and its sequel more closely represent modern day conventional warfare, not modern day asymmetrical warfare (even if the

game's levels are largely built around Special Forces missions). This conflation explains part of the games' ideological appeal. Infinity Ward's fictional war scenario is politically satisfying because it recasts the Manichean political dynamics of WWII (i.e., Allies vs. Axis powers) and the Cold War (i.e., U.S. vs. USSR) in the post-9/11 era, where such divisions are rarely that clear and where military might is generally quite lopsided. This design choice also makes sense given the franchise's successful track record with its WWII titles. There is, however, a more consequential textual mystification that helps explain the games' popularity.

Modern Warfare's campaigns focus on the gamer's combat in a contemporary setting, and the visual modality that dominates the games is that of the skilled soldier. But there exist pronounced moments in the games' single-player campaigns that stand apart from the rest – moments where the player is prevented from acting as the skilled and heroic soldier. At first blush, these scenes seemingly throw the hectic combat into stark relief by challenging postmodern warfare's existential and political anxieties; in particular, the dehumanizing distance of war machinery's technological mediation and the epoch's political crisis of meaning. These scenes are experientially arresting, literally; players are unable to move or defend themselves as they normally might. These narrative moments seemingly give the *Modern Warfare* titles a pronounced moral and political ambivalence. These scenes hint that "truth" on the battlefield is a complex and elusive entity, and that determining war's "winners and losers" is never as clear as the games' scoring mechanisms might suggest.

But like the design conceit that transforms asymmetrical counterinsurgency into a conventional and symmetrical war, these scenes too perform a textual slight of hand. Ironically, it is precisely these anomalous scenes' radical deviation from the martial gunplay that legitimize and rationalize the games' principal activities – namely, the martial gunplay. The narrative moments examined presently, which I am labeling moments of *sacrificial citizenship*, underscore the need for exercising and maintaining military vigilance by personally visualizing and experiencing the self-sacrifice that is largely absent in other shooters and similarly-themed militainment.[53]

Modern Warfare's shifting subjectivity engenders a pronounced sense of "sacrificial citizenship" that is a key affective element in the games' pro-counterinsurgency ideology. Sacrificial citizenship is not a term that has been thoroughly conceptualized to date. It appears sporadically across a range of scholarship, and it typically refers to a core element of American political identity that demands that the rights of citizenship be reaffirmed, and the political health of the U.S. body politic be reinvigorated, through citizens' periodic and voluntary self-sacrifices. This sacrifice can be figurative or literal in nature. For instance, legal scholar Paul Kahn (2010) discusses how the courtroom judge models a form of sacrificial citizenship when they do not rule by individual expertise, but rather "give themselves up to the law" (n.p.). Communication scholar Carolyn Marvin (1991) invokes sacrificial citizenship when discussing the American flag's symbolic power and public debates around flag burning. Marvin argues

[53] Please note: I am not claiming that scenes or themes of sacrifice are absent in contemporary war media. Rather, I am arguing that personal sacrifice is embodied because the war gamer controls (or has been controlling) the doomed avatar.

that the American flag is an "unacknowledged but potent symbol of the body … a special kind of body sanctified by sacrifice" (p. 120). In these quite different cases, sacrificial citizenship involves a form of discursive transfer or symbolic exchange with the physical self. The judge is not the law, but she is a vessel for law. The flag is not the soldier, but it is a potent representation of Americans who have sacrificed their bodies for the nation. Sacrificial citizenship in the *Modern Warfare* games likewise involves a virtual exchange. The exchange occurs along two fronts: it happens within the games' stories as characters' selfless actions are connected across their multiple storylines; and sacrificial citizenship happens experientially when the gamer plays through the characters' sacrifices. These textual elements work in tandem, producing an experiential modality that works to offset the mediated distance and the crisis of meaning posed by postmodern warfare. The chapter turns now to examining these video gameplay paroxysms.

Closing the Perspectival Distance in "No Russian" and "Second Sun"

There are a few notable soldier and civilian deaths in the *Modern Warfare* games that are scripted events; meaning, no matter how well one plays, certain characters cannot be saved because these deaths are part of the games' storylines. As was discussed last chapter, the first *Modern Warfare* game provides intimate scenes of one's own virtual death. These startling moments include the broadcast execution of overthrown President Al-Fulani, and the protracted death of U.S. Marine Paul Jackson following a small nuclear blast. The player is restricted from doing little more than looking around as they suffer through these characters' final moments. *Modern Warfare 2* continues in this same

vein of closing the gap between the player and their virtual demise, and it has at least two levels that require special attention – "No Russian" and "Second Sun."

The "No Russian" level contains the most controversial material in the two *Modern Warfare* games, and arguably that of the entire *Call of Duty* franchise.[54] This early level places the gamer at the center of the airport massacre that is the catalyst for the fictional conflict between Russia and the United States. The gamer plays as undercover CIA agent Joseph Allen who is tasked with infiltrating a Russian terrorist cell led by Vladimir Makarov. During the elevator ride to the terminal, the terrorist leader instructs his team (including the player, Allen) not to speak any Russian (hence the level's title) once they begin shooting, lest they reveal their true nationality. The elevator doors open and the five-man squad opens fire on the travelers making their way through the security checkpoint and in the terminal beyond.

[54] There are at least three reasons to suspect that Infinity Ward was purposefully courting controversy with the inclusion of the "No Russian" level. First, the game contains the option to skip the objectionable level and continue through the campaign mode. Second, the player may advance through the level without shooting civilians (the level is terminated, however, if the undercover player fires on the terrorists). And the third reason to think that the studio was generating hype is because details about this level were "leaked" in the final weeks right before the game's release.

Figure 2.1: The player participates in an airport massacre in *Modern Warfare 2*

The game narrative goes to considerable lengths to justify and punish Allen's – and by extension, the player's – participation in the slaughter. The sacrificial citizenship that is modeled in this level is two-fold: Allen compromises his morality for a shot at bringing Makarov to justice, and he ultimately loses his life for the botched mission. Even before the player is transported into the Allen character, the interstitial cut-scene[55] that plays while the level loads establishes the need for the agent's sacrifice.

The "No Russian" loading scene begins as a wide shot of the Earth – as it might be seen through a surveillance satellite in the Defense Department's imagined Global Information Grid – that observes military hot spots in Europe and Africa. In this segment's voice over, General Shepherd explains to the player the dire need for Allen's patriotic service. The satellite images give way to digitized newspaper clippings and

[55] Cut-scenes are common narrative devices in games that forward the narrative while game information (e.g., levels, assets, etc.) load in the background.

other data summarizing visually Makarov's long history of cruelty. The general states to Allen, the player:

> Yesterday you were a soldier on the front lines. But today front lines are history. Uniforms are relics. The war rages everywhere. And there will be casualties. This man Makarov is fighting his own war and he has no rules. No boundaries. He doesn't flinch at torture, human trafficking, or genocide. He's not loyal to a flag or a country or any set of ideals. He trades blood for money.
>
> He's your new best friend. You don't want to know what it's cost already to put you next to him. It will cost you a piece of yourself. It will cost nothing compared to everything you'll save. (Modern Warfare 2)

General Shepherd rationalizes how the long war against terrorism demands special soldiers who can face down monstrous non-state enemies. Soldiers who sacrifice a piece of themselves for the greater good is common thematic motif in war entertainment. Yet this instance of "sacrifice" assumes ghastly import when the gamer suddenly finds herself staring down her gun sights at a room full of unarmed civilians.

Another moment of personal sacrifice emerges at this level's finale, once Makarov and his men elude the airport's security forces. As the player steps into the escape van, Makarov turns and shoots the player. Before he dies, Allen hears the leader remark to one of his men: "The American thought he could deceive us. When they [the Russian authorities] find that body [Allen] … all of Russia will cry for war." Allen (and by extension the player) is punished for his participation in the massacre and for falling victim to Makarov's nefarious plans. (This would be an unceremonious conclusion indeed were the player not able to rectify the military's mistakes and exonerate the U.S. from criminal wrongdoing). The level's controversial content nevertheless underscores the need for soldiers to engage in morally suspect actions if those counterinsurgency

operations (e.g. undercover missions, low-intensity proxy wars, etc.) are to serve the nation's post-Cold War political interests. "No Russian" gives players the opportunity to see those questionable military actions up close, and it gives them the license to commit war crimes under the auspices of national security.

Figure 2.2: The terrorist leader Makarov kills the player at the conclusion of *Modern Warfare 2*'s "No Russian" level

In addition to committing "collateral damage," *Modern Warfare 2* also includes a memorable scene of becoming collateral damage. During the "Second Sun" level in the game's third and final act, the gamer plays as U.S. Ranger Private James Ramirez who is defending Washington D.C. against invading Russian forces. Ramirez's team is stationed near a downed helicopter while his outnumbered team runs low on ammunition. As an enemy attack chopper descends on the Rangers, its spotlight blinds Ramirez and the game suddenly transitions to an orbiting space station. The player is now in limited control of

an astronaut conducting a spacewalk. Houston's Control Center requests that the astronaut (the player) turn his helmet camera toward a bright object streaking over the horizon. Within a few short moments, the player sees that the object in question is the missile that was launched from a Russian submarine during a previous level. Suddenly, the rocket explodes in its low orbit, obliterating the International Space Station, and knocking the player-astronaut into the darkness of space. The screen fades again to white, as the player is transported back to Ramirez who is still hunkered beneath the helicopter. The rocket's explosion unleashes an electromagnetic pulse that disables the city's electronics, including American and Russian weapons and vehicles. With planes and helicopters falling from the sky around them (a not-so thinly-veiled visual allusion to the 9/11 attacks) Ramirez and the Rangers use this moment to their tactical advantage, and make their way to the besieged White House.

Figure 2.3: An exploding rocket demolishes a space station and knocks the player's character helplessly into space in *Modern Warfare 2*'s "Second Sun" level

Standing alone, the "No Russian" and "Second Sun" levels offer little more than nihilistic and bleak assessments of modern conflict. Slaughtering unarmed citizens or dying unceremonious deaths – be it as an undercover solider or non-combatant – is a stark but strangely welcome corrective to the sanitized and citizen-less representations of contemporary combat, much of which dominate the history of video war games. The "No Russian" and "Second Sun" scenes are not autonomous sequences, however, and they cannot help but be interpreted within the games' connected narratives. These first-person death sequences are contextualized within the larger storyline, thus diffusing their potential to prod the gamer into reexamining the precepts of postmodern war. Instead, these civilian losses become regrettable but necessary sacrifices – narratively and ideologically, speaking – of modern counterinsurgency. They are the human resources needed for maintaining the "long war" that is the U.S.'s War on Terror campaigns.

CLOSING HISTORICAL DISTANCES IN "ALL GHILLIED UP" & "ONE SHOT, ONE KILL"

> "Oceania was at war with Eastasia: Oceania had always been at war with Eastasia."
>
> -- George Orwell's *1984* (1949, p. 182)

> Captain Price: The Loyalists are expecting us half a click to the north. Move out.
> Gaz: Loyalists, eh? Are those the good Russians or the bad Russians?
> Captain Price: Well, they won't shoot at us on sight, if that's what you're asking.
> Gaz: Yeah, well that's good enough for me, sir.
>
> -- British SAS soldiers in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007)

Modern Warfare and similar shooters combat textually the anxieties of postmodern war by narrativizing virtual combat through the their immersive first- and

third-person perspectives. These ludic wars are not fought primarily from the mediated perspective of aerial vehicles or unmanned drones first made famous during the Persian Gulf War, but are conducted by warfighters on the ground – soldiers who sacrifice their physical selves for the sake of the nation. But contemporary war's political crisis of meaning is not only an effect of advanced communication technologies' experiential remove. As was noted last chapter, this crisis is also due to postmodern warfare's a-historical nature, and the post-Cold War era's absence of a reliable, ideological other. The *Modern Warfare* games' near-future conflicts work towards diffusing these related anxieties by establishing historical continuities between Cold War menaces and twenty-first century non-state terrorists, and by positioning the gamer as an agentive participant in these unfolding martial histories. The *Modern Warfare* games each possess telling back-to-back levels that work through, or perhaps more accurately, work *around* the political challenges of conducting modern day combat operations.

Call of Duty 4's "All Ghillied Up" and the "One Shot, One Kill" levels stand out by virtue that they are the series' only flashback sequences.[56] All of the other levels unfold sequentially and possess a clear narrative causality. The gamer, who has been taking orders from Captain John Price in previous levels, plays here as Lieutenant Price fifteen years before the game's main storyline – placing the action sometime in the mid-1990s. Paired with Scottish SAS officer Captain McMillan, he and the player are tasked with assassinating Imran Zakhaev during an open-air meeting in the abandoned city of

[56] The first level is named for the "ghillie suit" – a camouflage outfit worn by snipers and hunters.

Prypiat, Ukraine.[57] After the two soldiers stealthily make their way past patches of deadly radiation and enemy patrols, they assume a sniping position in a derelict high-rise. As Zakhaev's meet-up unfolds, McMillan coaches Price (the player) on the mechanics and challenges of firing his high-power sniper rifle from such a distance. After adjusting for wind and other variables, Price shoots Zakhaev and the force of the .50 caliber shot rips the Russian's left arm from his body. McMillan states (incorrectly) that the wound is fatal and he instructs Price to pack up and make haste to the extraction point. McMillan and Price encounter heavy resistance around the landing zone, but they manage to board a helicopter and are carried to safety. In deviating temporally from the present-day action in Europe and the Middle East, these two levels showcase the dual ideological functions served by the Zakhaev antagonist and the Prypiat space in the cultivation of the game's ludic pleasures as they relate to the visualization of history and sacrificial citizenship.

The Imran Zakhaev character fills the void of the absent, ideological other, and is the game's "missing link" between the Cold War's Communists and the War on Terror's "Islamofacists." This ideologue seeks to return Russia to its pre-capitalist glory, and he is the principal financier behind the Middle Eastern terrorists who have deposed and executed President Al-Fulani. But fifteen years before these events and prior to becoming the leader of the Russian Ultranationalist Party, Zakhaev operated as a rogue arms dealer who exploited the collapse of the Soviet Union for his personal gain. This is the point at which Price and McMillan interrupt his black market sale of stolen uranium fuel rods taken from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant (the site of the infamous April

[57] Prypiat may also be spelled: Pryp'yat' or Pripyat'.

26, 1984 "meltdown"). By creating a narrative through-line that connects the attempted black market sale of stolen uranium during the 1990s to the explosion of a nuclear device in the 2010s, the game evocatively connects Russian arms dealing and nuclear proliferation with Middle Eastern terrorism. (The fact that Zakhaev survives the assassination attempt by the SAS only further underscores the game's tacit assertion that Special Forces operatives need to exercise extreme martial prejudice to ensure that their human targets do not live to cause problems years later).

Price and McMillan's assassination mission also stands apart because it is one of the few moments in the first *Modern Warfare* game when the player interacts in a named and identifiable real-world space.[58] By setting these levels in Prypiat, Ukraine, *Modern Warfare* suddenly inserts a worldly reality into the game's near-real fiction. The historical memory of the worst nuclear power plant accident in human history becomes a convenient sliding signifier in these levels. Meaning, the game frames the city's tragic history not as an object lesson in the dangerous power of nuclear energy production, but as a convenient narrative backdrop for international lawlessness. The ghostly space is framed as a failing or failed political state that has become a magnet for terrorism, and which demands Western military interventions. Point of clarification: I do not wish to dispute the dangerous reality of WMDs, or the ability of terrorists and black market interests to exploit unguarded or under-guarded nuclear stockpiles. Rather, the point is

[58] For whatever reason or reasons – perhaps due to the unqualified success of the first game, the studio's sense of changing public sentiment, or perhaps due to the second game's outlandish plot – Infinity Ward did not eschew naming and re-creating real locales in *Modern Warfare 2* and *Modern Warfare 3* [2011] (e.g., Washington D.C., Rio de Janeiro, Afghanistan) as they had in the first game.

that by introducing a real space into the game's fictionalized history – in a narrative that has remained conspicuously vague about its combat settings – is startling. Indeed, the choice to include Prypiat is nearly as affecting as the depiction of the abandoned city itself; a point echoed by McMillan during their exploration: "Look at this place. 50,000 people use to live in this city. Now it's a ghost town. I've never seen anything like it."

Figures 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, and 2.7: *Call of Duty 4*'s rendering of Prypiat (L) and photos of the abandoned city (R)[59]

The dramatic intrusion of the historical real into the game's fictional diegesis conflates historical enemies of the West (not unlike the clumsy "Islamofascist" neologism) from different eras for the purpose of placing the current struggle into a comprehensible and, ultimately, defensible narrative. Functionally, the Prypiat levels communicate Price and Zakhaev's long-standing mutual antipathy, establishing their

[59] Image from: http://callofduty.filefront.com/potd/96531

personal motivations for their violent *tête-à-tête* in levels to come. Ideologically, however, this sequence portends that our collective fates hinge on the ability of Western powers' Special Forces to operate as needed, lest our cities come to resemble Prypiat (despite, of course, its fate not having been sealed by terrorists). The sacrificial citizenship modeled in these levels is a *quid pro quo* arrangement: the soldiers make sacrifices for us the citizenry; in return, we sacrifice or desire to know precisely how these operations are executed (or who is executed for that matter, and how).[60]

PLAYING WITH THE MODALITY OF HISTORY IN "END CREDITS" & "MUSEUM"

Modern Warfare 2's "End Credits" and its non-campaign "Museum" bonus level present players with two sides of the same proverbial coin as it relates to this war game's handling of sacrificial history. The former moment, which directly follows the conclusion of the game, is a virtual tour of a museum exhibit commemorating the game's fictional global war. As the production credits roll vertically, the virtual tour reminds players how civil society glorifies wars and its warriors, and how combat's victors consecrate their story as accepted history. The "Museum" bonus level is an interactive version of that same museum space. It is also an irreverent handling of the social process represented in the End Credits, and it offers a textual subversion available only in the video game form. While *Call of Duty 4*'s flashback levels in Prypiat illustrate how real history can be injected into a diegesis to lend narrative credibility and amplify the

[60] There is a perverse, all-too-real parallel in the manner in which the prisoner abuse scandal at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq unsettled and interrupted the prevailing national belief about the U.S. not torturing prisoners. Despite overwhelming proof to the contrary, politicians and defense apologists repeated the line, "the U.S. does not torture," as more conservative elements were saying simply, "my country, right or wrong."

affective dimensions of a fictional war, the End Credits of *Modern Warfare 2* reify the game's fictional happenings to model the quite real process by which worldly war victors calcify their version of events as the accepted public record. Said differently, and to reapply a concept from last chapter, *Modern Warfare*'s modality of play (i.e., modality as a textual apparatus) is the player's entry point for thinking about how a nation's history is always an unsettled matter (i.e., modality as the struggle over reality).

Once the player defeats the duplicitous and power-hungry General Shepherd in the single-player campaign, the screen fades to black and the game credits roll (accompanied by an orchestral track scored by the famed composer Hans Zimmer). Seconds later the screen fades back from black and the camera pulls out to reveal Captain Price sitting in a small boat on an exhibition stage with other game characters frozen in various poses nearby. The scene is a recreation of the game's final "Endgame" level, where Price and the gamer (playing then as Capt. "Soap" MacTavish) pursue Shepherd down an Afghan river.

The stillness is broken suddenly by a passer-by, and the previously frozen figures come to life. Also visible at this point are descriptive plaques positioned around the figures. It is now evident that we are in a history museum exhibition hall. The museum attendees are the "real" people in this scene: they chat with one another, inspect the exhibits, talk on their cell phones. The previously playable avatars and story characters on the stage are automatons.

Figures 2.8 and 2.9: Heroes and villains are memorialized on stage in *Modern Warfare 2*'s "End Credits"

After these figures complete their automated movements, the camera swings to the left, revealing a stage that depicts the U.S. Rangers' defense of Washington, D.C. against the Russians. This set shows James Ramirez's squad (the gamer's character in this level) standing against the backdrop of the charred White House. The camera then swings again, revealing the larger exhibition hall with other stages, vehicles, and glass displays housing *Modern Warfare 2*'s varied weapons. The credits continue to roll as the camera takes the viewer on a tour of the museum's stages representing the game's key set pieces – from fighting in the densely populated "favelas" (slums) of Rio De Janeiro, climbing the icy mountains of Kazakhstan, to swimming to a heavily-guarded off-shore oil rig. The museum tour ends once the floating camera has finished exploring the museum's three halls. The screen fades back to black and the credits continue rolling.

The End Credits' museum tour is more than a reflective "curtain call" for the Infinity Ward design studio and its virtual combatants. It is a pointed conclusion to the

game's theme of military history and the contestation over its historiography that is articulated throughout the series. This theme is especially pronounced in the voice-overs during the second game's loading screens. For example, before his treacherous plans are revealed, General Shepherd offers this reflection on the U.S. military:

> We are the most powerful military force in the history of man. Every fight is our fight. Because what happens over here matters over there. We don't get to sit one out. Learning to use the tools of modern warfare is the difference between the prospering of your people, and utter destruction. We can't give you freedom. But we can give you the know-how to acquire it. And that, my friends, is worth more than a whole army base of steel. Sure it matters who's got the biggest stick, but it matters a hell'uva lot more who's swinging it. This is a time for heroes. A time for legends. History is written by the victors. Let's get to work. (Modern Warfare 2)

Shepherd's thoughts about the need to wield military power agree with strategic aspirations as outlined by General David Patraeus' famed counterinsurgency manual (e.g., the U.S. cannot abstain from participating in the "long war," the need to train other nations to acquire "freedom"), and they are in line with the doctrine's cultural goals as assessed by visual studies scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff (e.g., the centrality of Western culture in replacing weapons stockpiles, i.e., "whole army base of steel"). But it is Shepherd's common refrain throughout the game – "History is written by the victors"[61] – that best explains the curious location of the End Credits, and why the virtual museum tour is a revealing coda for the franchise.

In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson discusses the museum's power as a state apparatus that fulfill numerous cultural and political functions. Foremost among these are the legitimization of the ruling elite's hold on popular understandings of

[61] This phrase's origins is unknown, but is commonly attributed to Winston Churchill.

the nation's history and, by extension, its definition of citizenship. These institutions sterilize the ugly history of colonial conquest for consumption by tourists, and with other social technologies like the map and census, provide the social glue that unify a nation's imagined community of citizens (Anderson, 1983, Chapter 10).

If the museum tour reads as particularly somber and serene it is because it lacks the frenetic fighting that has structured both games up until this point. As museums cannot help but to do, the stage exhibits sanitize the intense violence and elide the soldiers' personal stories of sacrifice – some of which the player witnessed and experienced personally. During the second to last mission, "Just Like Old Times," Captain Price justifies the suicide mission that he and Capt. MacTavish (the player) are about to embark on. He reflects:

> The healthy human mind doesn't wake up in the morning thinking this is its last day on Earth. But I think that's a luxury, not a curse. To know you're close to the end is a kind of freedom. Good time to take … inventory. Outgunned. Outnumbered. Out of our minds on a suicide mission, but the sands and rocks here stained with thousands of years of warfare … they will remember us for this. Because out of all our vast array of nightmares, this is the one we choose for ourselves. We go forward like a breath exhaled from the Earth. With vigor in our hearts and one goal in sight: We will kill [Gen. Shepherd]. (*Modern Warfare 2*)

The player's first-hand experience of the fictional war's history extends well beyond that which is on display in the museum. The player has traveled to the varied war theaters represented in the exhibition halls, she has shot the guns that are resting safely in the display cases, and has fought and bled with the soldiers modeled on stage. The player has also witnessed this action from a variety of soldier and civilian perspectives, all of which contribute to an embodied sense of sacrificial citizenship that is summarily memorialized

in the final tour of the museum space. But this is not the game's only presentation of the museum space. And its second depiction is anything but hallowed.

The "Museum" bonus level is the game's antithesis to the earnest sacrificial sacrifice engendered throughout the series' story-driven campaign modes. *Modern Warfare 1* and *2* are committed to immersing the player into an affecting war story that provides moral context and narrative motivation for the gamer's martial actions. The non-diegetic and non-narrative museum level is categorically disinterested in these goals. Moreover, it represents the unstable and frolicsome undercurrent of gameplay that opponents of war game find so objectionable. The museum level bears a closer resemblance to the multiplayer modes common in military shooters because of its privileging of "quick twitch" gameplay above any story. As is often the case in the virtual arenas of multiplayer matches, there is no narrative setup. The player must use their assets and skills as best they can to survive waves of overwhelming enemies.

The playable rendition of the museum space that is revealed during the previously discussed End Credits sequence is a tourist-less bonus level that is unlocked after the single-player campaign is completed. This enigmatic level opens with this title card – "An evening with Infinity Ward. Modern Warfare 2 Gallery Exhibit. Encino, California, U.S.A." – and it lets players explore the museum's three halls and its display cases, including removing and firing weapons from said display cases. There are no mission objectives or game goals directing the player's action in this museum-turned-shooting gallery. During their exploration, gamers may discover one of two red buttons on information desks in the museum's halls. They are labeled ominously, "Do Not Press."

After pushing either button – as the curious player is surely wont to do – the space is transformed into a nightmarish Epcot-esque exhibit hall as the soldiers on stage spring to life and assault the player *en masse*.

Figure 2.10: The gamer battles soldiers of history in *Modern Warfare 2*'s bonus "Museum" level

In eschewing any narrative pretext by pitting the player against characters drawn from the levels (e.g., protagonists, antagonists, various soldier classes) the museum level revels in the kinesthetic pleasures of non-narrative gunplay. This is pure spectacle to be enjoyed for its own aesthetic sake. The firefight's unbridled celebration of gun spectacle is an important reminder that there are non-narrative pleasures of ludic war (i.e., recall the aesthetic pleasures that war games like *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty* share). The museum's gunplay is not completely free form play; the action still respects the game's physics and damage system. There is, however, no additional narrative or rule set governing the player's actions. The level's martial gameplay bears a closer resemblance to Roger Caillois' notion of *paidia* (play as an unstructured activity) than it does to Johan

Huizinga's *ludus* (rule-based play), as the gameplay has throughout the campaign missions. Moreover, this subversive and irreverent collapsing of the game's fictional history into an unprovoked, non-narrative battle royal does little to address postmodern war's crisis of meaning. This absurd fight has no reasonable explanation; it is, with the push of a button, a museum besieged by gun-wielding maniacs. The museum's celebratory shooting spectacle is a convenient prompt for considering textual elements beyond the immersive perspective and counterinsurgency narrative that engender pleasures in post-9/11 ludic wars; elements like agency and transformation which are discussed next chapter.

CONCLUSION: NARRATING COUNTERINSURGENCY, BECOMING COUNTERINSURGENCY

> War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.
>
> The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like brilliant red ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorus, the purply orange glow of napalm, the rocket's red glare. It's not pretty, exactly. It's astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference – a powerful implacable beauty – and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly.
>
> – from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990, pp. 80-81)

Bookending this chapter is Tim O'Brien's arresting reminder of creative fiction's ability to convey experiential elements of modern combat (here, the Vietnam War), including its subjective and its contradictory "truths," even when those ostensible truths are drawn from an author's imagination. These fictional truths concern questions of content and form, of subject matter and media modality. What makes a war story feel "true?" Why do some tales leave us unmoved, while others "turn the stomach?" Why might the same war story resonate in one media but not another? Or, why might it resonate differently? In the above quote, O'Brien recognizes the visceral pleasures of warfare's visual spectacle (the "aesthetic purity of moral indifference – a powerful implacable beauty"). This is a violent phantasmagoria that the military shooter has been able to simulate successfully thanks to its photo-realistic visuals, surround sound, haptic feedback, etc. But these games do more than replicate "the rockets' red glare" and "the bombs bursting in air" – they narrate soldiers' personal combat experiences, and the player bears witness to and participates in dramatic acts of virtual patriotism in *Modern Warfare*'s intertwined narratives.

These games also add a sheen of legitimacy to the U.S.'s policy gambit in the Middle East by closing the perspectival distances of television's war optics and by reframing the War on Terror as the latest and greatest symmetrical Cold War. The games' war stories and the player's changing points of view posit that counterinsurgency interventions are necessary, as are occasional civilian sacrifices. Indeed, by narrating a righteous and successful counterinsurgency story (even if we ignore for the moment the purposeful conflation between the types of warfare described earlier) the games posit that

such interventions are an effective means of protecting U.S. and Western interests. The following chapter continues this line of textual analysis by examining how Tom Clancy-brand shooters support a conservative version of American exceptionalism.

I want to conclude this chapter with a final thought regarding the "sacrifices" in *Modern Warfare* because I anticipate some exception to how this chapter has discussed the term. As was noted earlier, the moments of sacrifice are technologically scripted events through and through. The player has no power to decide whether or not their avatar volunteers his or her virtual life. This inability to volunteer oneself freely – virtually or otherwise – cannot rightly be called "sacrifice" as there is no elective surrendering of the self. One might rightly ask: how meaningful (or, how truly sacrificial) can these virtual deaths be?

Two responses come to mind: the first is a practical matter concerning narrative cohesion; and the second is a modality issue involving processes of identification. In story-driven video games there is a persistent design tension between crafting a compelling narrative and designing gameplay rules and freedoms. In these rare moments of forced sacrifice, the games clearly subordinate the player's agency to the story's concerns. If these games were judged *only* by the gamer's delimited range of agency (if not total paralysis) during these anomalous moments, these virtual deaths would be interpreted by players as politically hollow and disaffecting. The characters are clearly sacrificed because it amplifies the stories' conflicts. If players could chose not to die, it would complicate the task of designing causal narratives that justify the player-soldiers' violent gunplay.

My second response to the anticipated objection concerns user identification with video game characters. The sacrificial events in war films and TV programs are rarely questioned as "un-sacrificial" because the determinacy of these moving-image media is never in question. This is clearly not the case for video games. Ludic sacrifice is at least technically conceivable, even if it is not a standard component of military shooters' design (which it assuredly is not).[62] These titles overwhelmingly possess linear narratives and spatial designs that do not, as a rule, permit much choice beyond avatar customization (how the soldier looks), tactics (how to attack the enemy), and weapon and/or vehicle selection. This is partially a question of media affordances and genre expectations, but it is also one of user identification. The viewer's identification with the cinematic or televisual soldier is not the same as the player's identification with the computational soldier. Despite the rupture in identification with a character over whom the player has limited or lost control, it is critical to remember that these moments are affecting precisely because the player is suddenly stripped of the will-to-power they normally enjoy. The *Modern Warfare* games ask the player to sacrifice their agency and disbelief momentarily for the sake of narrative satisfaction.

American political identity was laid bare in the minutes, days, and weeks after the 9/11 attacks. The un-controllable scenes of sacrifice in the *Modern Warfare* games provocatively connect with these feelings of helplessness and paralysis. As the book's Introduction documents, the rapid return to the discourse and doctrine of American

[62] There are, for instance, role-playing video games where players may make moral choices that then shape subsequent narrative and non-player characters' responses.

exceptionalism was one popular, reactionary strategy of regaining a sense of control that the nation had lost. The next chapter addresses the ludic means of virtually re-seizing that sense of political power by examining the character and spatial designs in Tom Clancy's technothriller shooters.

Chapter Three

Fighting the Good, Preemptive Fight: American Exceptionalism in Tom Clancy's Military Shooters

"…Defending our Nation against its enemies is the first and fundamental commitment of the Federal Government. Today, that task has changed dramatically. Enemies in the past needed great armies and great industrial capabilities to endanger America. Now, shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering to our shores for less than it costs to purchase a single tank. Terrorists are organized to penetrate open societies and to turn the power of modern technologies against us.

To defeat this threat we must make use of every tool in our arsenal—military power, better homeland defenses, law enforcement, intelligence, and vigorous efforts to cut off terrorist financing. The war against terrorists of global reach is a global enterprise of uncertain duration. America will help nations that need our assistance in combating terror. And America will hold to account nations that are compromised by terror, including those who harbor terrorists— because the allies of terror are the enemies of civilization. The United States and countries cooperating with us must not allow the terrorists to develop new home bases. Together, we will seek to deny them sanctuary at every turn.

The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination. The United States will not allow these efforts to succeed. We will build defenses against ballistic missiles and other means of delivery. We will cooperate with other nations to deny, contain, and curtail our enemies' efforts to acquire dangerous technologies. And, as a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed. We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. So we must be prepared to defeat our enemies' plans, using the best intelligence and proceeding with deliberation. History will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action…"

-- Pres. George W. Bush's remarks on the 2002 National Security Strategy

"Always historicize!"

-- Fredric Jameson's opening directive in *The Political Unconscious* (2006, p. ix)

INTRODUCTION

On September 20, 2002 the Bush administration unveiled a revamped national security strategy that described the government's newfound defense policy of unilateral, preemptive military action to face down would-be terrorist threats. This aggressive brand of foreign policy represented a dramatic change from the multilateral deterrence strategies that had dominated the Cold War and early post-Cold War years. Critics questioned the dramatic change of tone and posturing, arguing instead for caution and diplomacy. Meanwhile, supporters believed that the 9/11 attacks (then, only a year old) provided all the necessary justification for a more interventionist defense strategy. And yet, as philosopher Samuel Weber observes in *Targets of Opportunity* (2005), as radical a shift as preemptive war policy represents, it is also a continuation of one of the nation's most enduring political and cultural beliefs: American exceptionalism.[63] According to this belief, the U.S.'s unique political origins and economic and productivity successes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provide policymakers with all the necessary justifications for pursing a state of perpetual military supremacy (see, McCrisken, 2003; Hodgson, 2009). Weber argues: "Global political *supremacy*, understood in large measure to derive from economic and technological superiority, is at the same time

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[63] American exceptionalism has a long history with some diverging definitions. Most generally it describes the idea that the "United States is an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; not only unique but also superior among nations…The belief in American exceptionalism forms a core element of American national identity and American nationalism" (McCrisken, 2003, p. 1). Furthermore, the American exceptionalism discourse is said to have two dominant themes or threads: the first is an idealistic, supportive "city on the hill"; while the second is a more militant, expansive country guided by the forces of "manifest destiny" and the creation of a new world order (see, McCrisken, 2003, p. 2).

declared to be *supremely vulnerable*, given the relative availability of destructive technologies to 'rogue states' and, perhaps even worse, to nonstate 'terrorist' groups" (emphasis in original, p. 94, 2005). President Bush and his neoconservative allies argued for increased defense spending *and* executive privilege to preemptively prosecute terrorists, rogue states, and "evil-doers" with extreme martial prejudice.

The 9/11 attacks offered neoconservatives the pretense for pushing though an aggressive post-Cold War defense policy that had actually been crafted nearly a decade before in the wake of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Then, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney with fellow neocons Paul Wolfowitz and I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, drafted a classified document in 1992 called the "Defense Planning Guidance" that advocated three primary objectives for American foreign policy: (1) preventing the ascendance of any competing superpower; (2) gaining and maintaining access to Middle Eastern oil reserves; and (3) the efficacy of unilateral military action in meeting these objectives (Weber, 2005, p. 96). This controversial document was later withdrawn after it was leaked to the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. However, its central tenets remained popular in conservative policy circles and think tanks, and it finally found its official public articulation in September of 2002; an articulation that represents a generational shift in the public's understanding of exceptionalism "from the liberal consensus to the conservative ascendency" that had been taking place during the last half of the twentieth century (Hodgson, 2009, p. 100). Unofficially, this revitalized and aggressive post-Cold War interventionist policy was articulated in a variety of military-themed entertainments.

And there is arguably no commercial brand more synonymous with militainment and American exceptionalism – before and after 9/11 – than the name Tom Clancy.

In the previous two chapters, I argued for the utility of "gameplay modality" as an analytical concept, and applied it to understanding how *Modern Warfare*'s narrative subjectivity attempts to ameliorate postmodern war's representational problems by reinterpreting what modern-day counterinsurgency looks and feels like. This chapter continues in a similar investigative vein, with the purpose of examining how the character and level designs of the best-selling series *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas* and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* represent American's high-tech military capabilities and policy beliefs about the use of preemptive martial force. The Clancy shooters enable the player to become a virtual, military insider who knows how and why to fight during these imagined, near-future crises. The justifications for preemptive war emerge out of the games' mutually reinforcing avatar and spatial design constructs, producing a paranoid imaginary that reinforces the righteousness of neoconservative foreign policy ideas popularized during the early 2000s.

The four Clancy titles examined herein have been selected for close analysis for several reasons. First, as of 2010, all four shooters (*Advanced Warfighter I* [2006] *& II* [2007], and *Vegas I* [2006] *& II* [2008]) have sold over a million copies each, making them best-selling titles by conventional game industry standards. Second, because Clancy's work is arguably the apotheosis of pro-U.S. military fiction – he is the so-called "novelist laureate of the military industrial complex" (Thomas, 1989, p. 1) – these games offer unique points of entry for understanding how a multimedia brand renowned for its

attention to technological detail and suspenseful narratives is adapted for interactive play. Finally, the *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* series are prototypical squad-based tactical shooters that immerse the player in the role of a counter-terrorist squad team leader who must execute tactically sound actions to complete the mission; in effect, transforming the player into the military solution in these fictionalized Wars on Terror. These games clearly profit from their status as Clancy properties – a point which will be explored shortly – but as interactive, immersive counter-terrorist exercises, these games also model the political utility of martial power when it is executed "correctly." By remaining attentive to what these games ask and allow us to do, and how they represent American soldiers and domestic spaces in the early twenty-first century, we can appreciate the foremost gameplay pleasures of becoming a technowarrior in these ludic wars, and how the design choices reflect a particular view of American exceptionalism after 9/11.

TOM CLANCY'S BRANDED WARFARE

Contrary to his prominent billing, Tom Clancy has had relatively little input on the production of the games that bear his name; the exception to this rule being his collaboration with Red Storm Entertainment's production of the first *Rainbow Six* game in 1998 (Upton, 2003, p. 252). It is instead more accurate to think of the author's input on the game design and content as functioning on the level of Clancy-the-brand or Clancy-the-genre. Case in point: In 2008, the French video game publishing powerhouse Ubisoft bought the rights to Tom Clancy's name. Previously, Ubisoft had published Clancy games only after paying royalties to the author. Ubisoft elected to acquire all of the "intellectual property rights to the Tom Clancy name, on a perpetual basis and free of all

related future royalty payments, for use in video games and ancillary products including related books, movies and merchandising products" because the firm projected that it would save on royalties, which would "have an average positive impact on Ubisoft's operating income of a minimum of 5 million Euros per year" (Terdiman, 2008, n.p.). Ubisoft and its design studios are now tasked with ensuring the brand's maintenance. (Nothing quite says "American exceptionalim" like selling one's name to a French video game company).

If an auteurist reading of the Clancy games produces too limited a view of the titles' concerns, then a brand or genre analysis that includes all of the Clancy games produces too broad an analysis due to their gameplay diversity. As it was noted in the Introduction, the *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* series are squad based tactical shooters; the *Splinter Cell* games concern solitary stealth and espionage; *Endwar* (2009) is a real-time strategy game; and *H.A.W.X.* (2009) an aerial assault game. That is, while many of Clancy's franchises unfold in ostensibly similar diegetic worlds with similarly contrived "save the world" plots (i.e., U.S. or Western powers) and characters, playing as a member of a counter-terrorist team engaged in close quarters combat is a wholly different experience from conducting the impersonal war planning integral to a strategy game, or unleashing powerful munitions from an aircraft onto ground and aerial targets. These differing game mechanics and stories structure users' interactions, and directly shape those notably different gameplay modalities. For these practical reasons, the present analysis concerns only the broad contours of Clancy's technothriller fiction as it informs his brand's best-selling military shooters.

The *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* franchises borrow heavily from Clancy's decidedly pro-U.S. technothriller genre[64] – where suspenseful narrative elements are structured largely around military-grade technologies and their surreptitious uses – and its related discourse of technowar, or treating modern warfare as a capitalistic endeavor that privileges technology and economics in its production (see Gibson, 1986). Technothriller fiction generally, and Clancy's games in particular, endorse a highly militarized version of American exceptionalism by representing the Defense Department's programs and postmodern warfighting techniques – most notably the Revolution in Military Affairs, or those military programs and policies about how to best wage technology-centered future warfare – in a favorable light. Accordingly, the majority of the critical ink spilled on Clancy's novels has centered on the author's Manichaean moral universe and his preoccupation with military technologies and warfighting strategies.[65]

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[64] Helen Garson (1996) offers this useful explanation of the genre: "Technothrillers are often a form of military fiction, with players who are soldiers, sailors, pilots. The novel serves as a subordinate backdrop to display advancements and projections of weaponry and war. Actual war, possible war, or averted war is fought on the pages of the technothriller … The crises and solutions in most technothrillers are mechanical. People may make mistakes, but the focus of the plot is on the machinery not on human limitations. The "good" characters in technothrillers are clearly delineated, are on the "right" side and, in the military fiction, are superpatriots" (p. 36).

[65] For instance, Walter Hixson (1993) sees Clancy's novels as celebrating the "cult of national security" that posits that the U.S. is best served by an executive branch that controls foreign policy using whatever means necessary, including subversive, covert, and constitutionally questionable, if not patently illegal, operations (pp. 605-606). Emphasizing a similar point, Celeste Fraser Delgado (1996) contends that the government's surreptitious and celebrated exercises of power in Clancy's work, specifically agencies like the CIA and their ability to "disappear" people, is their primary power (i.e., their show of physical force is through the power of disappearance) (pp. 127-128). And Andrew Hill (2009) sees Clancy's work and similar technothriller fiction, like the television series *24*, as justifying government-backed torture and domestic

The Clancy games' eventual commercial successes were first sown during the waning years of the Cold War after President Ronald Reagan enthusiastically endorsed the author's breakout political pulp fiction novel, *The Hunt for Red October* (1984), in 1985. According to *Life Magazine* journalist Loundon Wainwright, Reagan called the novel "the perfect yarn," and most likely enjoyed it because the story offered "relief from the drab reality of life – although it might be disconcertingly close to some of the reality in Reagan's daily intelligence briefings" (1985, p. 7). In his report of the President's escapist reading, Wainwright is also one of the first to critically assess the attractions of Clancy's fiction. The reporter astutely notes:

> But surely one of the book's biggest selling points has to be that it all comes out right in the end. More than that, it reaffirms the comfortable convictions we have about ourselves and our superiority over the usually villainous Russians. In its broad strokes the book is as much an act of propaganda and caricature as those scores of Happy Yank films Hollywood turned out during World War II. There's nothing wrong with the novel; it's simply a not very skillful wrapping of action in the flag. It must be reassuring to many, including the President, to read novels that feature the good intentions, the ingenuity and the bravery of Americans, to fantasize for a few hours that the best Soviet commanders will wnat (*sic*) to defect, that in an orderly and well-plotted world we must win out over a people weakened by their slavish adherence to a cruel and rotten ideology. (1985, p. 7)

Clancy's dozen-plus novels published after *The Hunt for Red October* assume a similar literary construction and ideological disposition. In *The New American Militarism* (2005), Andrew Bacevich describes the author's *oeuvre* in these broad strokes:

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authoritarianism under the auspices of combating and preventing stateside terrorism. Hill argues: "In Tom Clancy, readers are initiated into the 'insider world' of the military and intelligence communities through technical language; in *24*, the language of technowar is translated visually, literally and formally presenting the War on Terror as a high-tech information war" (p. 136).

> In any Clancy novel, the international order is a dangerous and threatening place, awash with heavily armed and implacably determined enemies who threaten the United States. That Americans have managed to avoid Armageddon is attributable to a single fact: the men and women of America's uniformed military and of its intelligence services have thus far managed to avert those threats. The typical Clancy novel is an unabashed tribute to the skill, honor, extraordinary technological aptitude, and sheer decency of the nation's defenders … For Clancy and other contributors to the [technothriller] genre, refuting the canards casually tossed at soldiers in the aftermath of Vietnam forms part of their self-assigned charter. (p. 117)

Not shockingly, American military personnel and conservative opinion leaders are among Clancy's biggest supporters. The respect is largely mutual, as the author counts Reagan, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, retired General Colin Powell, and Colonel Oliver North among his favorite and inspiring public servants (Garson, 1996, p. 8).

Clancy's most venomous contempt is reserved for terrorists and Congress, a fact that is reflected in many of his works. The author is famously quoted as saying: "There are a lot of people in Congress who…would rather trash the military than hug their own kids" (Cooper, 1988, p. 60). The author's general disregard of America's preeminent representative and deliberative political body – an elected quorum whose governing actions are by design balanced by other governmental actors and measured by debate – is anathema to the decisive action enjoyed by the author's patriotic technocrats and soldiers. Clancy, like his fictional heroes, prefers action to deliberation.

Clancy's early publishing successes established the technothriller's generic parameters, while the brand's subsequent wide-ranging entertainment wares solidified in

consumers' minds what to expect from the Clancy name.[66] After all, the author's prosaic fiction contains all the necessary ingredients for remediating his pro-military fiction into the video game form: his canon contains readily identifiable protagonists (i.e., soldiers and government agents) who are primed for technologically aided action (i.e., tactical warfare) against some international threat (i.e., terrorist groups, rogue states) that will underscore the political righteousness of American exceptionalism.

The commercial success of his pulp fiction migrated swiftly to Clancy's movies and video games because, like the novels, these texts narrate the political stakes of postmodern war and represent visually state-sponsored violence (not unlike TV shows like *24*)[67]. Yet the Clancy games locate players in an experiential space different from TV/film viewers or from pulp fiction readers. The Clancy games remediate the genre one step further – beyond narration and visualization alone or in tandem – by modeling the field tactics needed to best non-state terrorists. The Clancy-brand video games are thus the fullest textual realization of the author's technothriller universe because the user has the richest opportunity to experience these American war mythologies by enacting and

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[66] "Commodification turns genre into a brand-name…and the social contract into a product guarantee" (Buchanan, 2006, p. 74).

[67] Andrew Hill (2009) sees a substantial thematic overlap between Clancy's signature heroes and 24's Jack Bauer. Hill notes: "We see in the novels of Tom Clancy and in 24 the convergence of two powerful mythologies of warfare: that of the American frontier hero, independent, innovative, hard, stoic, isolate, and a killer, and that of technowar, the conceptualization of war as a high-tech, scientific production process … These complementary mythologies create in these texts a cult of the technowarrior, in which those with the "right" knowledge, the "right" technology, and the "right" willingness to use them are elevated to the status of infallible guardians of the sacred order of American culture" (2009, p. 140).

becoming the righteous technowarrior. That is, the games support the discourse of technowar and American exceptionalism found in technothriller fiction generally, but these shooters also enable gamers to play with the martial force by which global political hegemony is secured. This textual affordance helps explain the games' popularity, and the brand's overall value to its game publisher Ubisoft. Taken together, the Clancy games are the tenth best selling franchise of all time, having sold over 55 million units worldwide as of May 2008, surpassing other memorable franchises in sales such as *The Legend of Zelda*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and the *Resident Evil* series (Martin, 2008, n.p.).

THE GAMEPLAY MODALITY OF THE "GOOD FIGHT"

The *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* and *Rainbow Six: Vegas* series depict the political necessity and strategic efficacy of postmodern military interventions using similar stories and gameplay designs. The *Advanced Warfighter* and *Vegas* narratives unfold in the near-future Americas (*Warfighter* in 2013 and *Vegas* in 2010), with their conflicts originating in the streets of Mexican cities and ending on U.S. soil. Both franchises locate the gamer in the midst of these firefights using first- (*Vegas*) and third-person (*Warfighter*) perspectives in mainly outdoor expanses (*Warfighter*) and tight, indoor spaces (*Vegas*).

Figure 3.1: A third-person view of a firefight in *Advanced Warfighter 2* [68]

Figure 3.2: A first-person view of the hectic action in *Vegas 2* [69]

[68] Image from: http://ps3.ign.com/dor/tom-clancys-ghost-recon-advanced-warfighter-2/862424/images/tom-clancys-ghost-recon-advanced-warfighter-2-20070801061227947.html

In both franchises, the player's counter-terrorism specialists are armed with a cache of weapons and communication devices to facilitate precise and well-timed strikes to foil the terrorist plots, most of which center on eliminating enemies and neutralizing weapons of mass destruction. *Warfighter*'s instruction manual summarizes its action thusly: "The Ghost Recon squad, led by Scott Mitchell [the gamer], is expert at using its sharp military tactics to survive seemingly impossible military situations. In this realistic conflict, 'run and shoot' behaviors are not a viable option and will only result in quick death. To prevail Scott Mitchell must use his tactical assets to their fullest" (Ubisoft, 2006, p. 3).

Although these games have similar stories and mechanics, they nevertheless possess unique design elements that make them worth exploring individually. For the *Advanced Warfighter* games, the future warfighter's proper and judicious use of high-tech weaponry and information and communication technologies are of paramount importance and represent the Defense Department's current approach to "net-centric" warfare as being the best means of fighting twenty-first century terrorists. The *Vegas* games, meanwhile, unfold amid civilian population centers in the Americas and in the U.S., and these games stress the need for maintaining a preemptive policy of "fighting them there, so we don't have to fight them here." Taken together, the Clancy shooters' gameplay modality – again, understood as textual vehicles for narratives *and* as beliefs about the way the world works – illustrate the efficacy and moral righteousness of

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[69] Image from: http://www.gamersdailynews.com/images/uploads/20080325_RainbowVegas2screenshot(5).jpg

preemptive, technologically aided martial strikes to prevent horrific attacks on civilians, helping to ensure a state of post-9/11 *Pax Americana*.

HOW WE FIGHT: VISUALIZING TECHNOLOGICAL EXCEPTIONALISM IN *GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER*

The Clancy name is a key asset to the lasting financial vitality of Ubisoft's product line. However, the Clancy games themselves do not represent a singular authorial voice as much as they imagine a set of overlapping technology and policy concerns common to postmodern warfare. The *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* series celebrate a technology-rich form of militarized American exceptionalism that represent: a technowar discourse where defense officials manage war like a corporate business or a science (Gibson, 1986); the increased reliance on (if not fetishization of) techno-centric solutions as represented by the Revolution in Military Affairs (Gray, 1997; Martin, 2007); and the growing centrality of net-centric modes of conflict and the efficacy of prototype (and as yet unproven) weapon technologies like the Future Combat System that transform soldiers into cyber nodes in real-time information grids (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Mirrlees, 2009; Smicker, 2009; Hay, 2010). These cutting-edge and near-future information and weapons technologies promise to make the military's Special Forces units more agile, lethal, and invisible. Or, in the language of our "just in time" production culture, they are destruction-on-demand.[70] Clancy's titles transform the player –

[70] Martin (2007) explains how the Revolution in Military Affairs and military procurement began reflecting the "new economy" of the 1990s: "But the RMA, which boasts to remove labor from the scene of battle, provided cover for substantial reductions in active duty military personnel not unlike the outsourcing and downsizing of labor that drove the new economy. Between 1987 and 1999 the army reduced its ranks by over

according to the *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* instruction manual – into "the soldier of the future." It continues: "In full command of the cutting edge of military technology, *you* are the most lethal, high-tech soldier on the battlefield" (emphasis added, Ubisoft, 2006, p. 3).

The player must use their technological advantages and training to overcome the superior enemy numbers and foil the terrorists' attacks on civilian populations and domestic infrastructure in *Advanced Warfighter I and II*. In the first game, the player's elite band of "ghosts" are deployed to Mexico City in 2013 after Nicaraguan rebel forces steal U.S. military hardware and try to unload their ill-gotten wares to Mexican paramilitary forces. Before the ghosts recover the equipment, however, they are redirected to the Mexican capital to save the Mexican and U.S. Presidents and the Canadian Prime Minister from a *coup d'état*. The North American leaders were meeting to announce the North American Joint Security Agreement (NAJSA) treaty (there are terrorist threats in both games to governmental defense infrastructure and negotiations). The Canadian Prime Minister is killed in the attack, the U.S. president disappears, and thus begins the player's 48-hour mission to save U.S. President James Ballantine, prevent the military technology from falling into the wrong hands, and tamp down the Mexican insurgency. In a similar hyperbolic vein, *Advanced Warfighter II* unfolds a year later as Mitchell's ghost team is sent to Ciudad Juarez to neutralize a nuclear device that has

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300,000, the navy by over 200,000, and the air force by nearly a quarter-million. The 1990s saw demobilization of six divisions (from eighteen to twelve) and the loss of a known enemy. Subsequently, planning would need to be oriented toward using a more concentrated force for any number of kinds of intervention" (p. 77).

fallen into the hands of the same rebel force that is now threatening to take out an American nuclear defense shield.

True to Clancy's narrative poetics, and not unlike the *Modern Warfare* games, the *Advanced Warfighter* titles contain *numerous* complex plot twists that make recounting their serpentine storylines tedious work. More importantly, such a detailed summary fails to illuminate what it is these games do best: represent techno-warriors, their technologies, and tactics. This is not to suggest that the stories are irrelevant; indeed, the narratives provide the moral justification for taking martial action (as was argued last chapter). Still, it is more illuminating in this case to examine how the player is primed to act in *Advanced Warfighter*, since the player's successful actions propel the games' narratives.

The player engages the enemy in *Advanced Warfighter*'s proleptic, post-Cold War battlefields as a high-tech, decision-making node in an interconnected, cybernetic weapons system. The game's centerpiece visual interface is the "Integrated Warfighter System." This is a fictionalized version of the Defense Department's actual "Future Force Warrior" – itself, a major weapons subsystem of the (now defunct) Future Combat Systems project (2003-2009).[71] Key features of the game's Integrated Warfighter System include advanced communications and networked optics that keep the ghosts connected with one another and with their commanders, and a sophisticated heads-up display

[71] In 2009, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates ordered the $160 billion Future Combat Systems program dismantled, and its technologies repurposed for existing Army-wide modernization efforts (Osborn, 2009, n.p.). This decision is part of Gates' pragmatic effort to change the Pentagon's focus on fighting future wars via programs epitomized by the Revolution in Military Affairs programs, with the need to fight today's wars (Shachtman, 2009, pp. 116-140).

(HUD) that maps virtual information over worldly objects and terrain in real-time (i.e., augmented reality). The player also remotely controls a bevy of piloted and pilotless support vehicles (e.g., spy drones, armored personnel carriers) that offer additional firepower and reconnaissance capabilities.

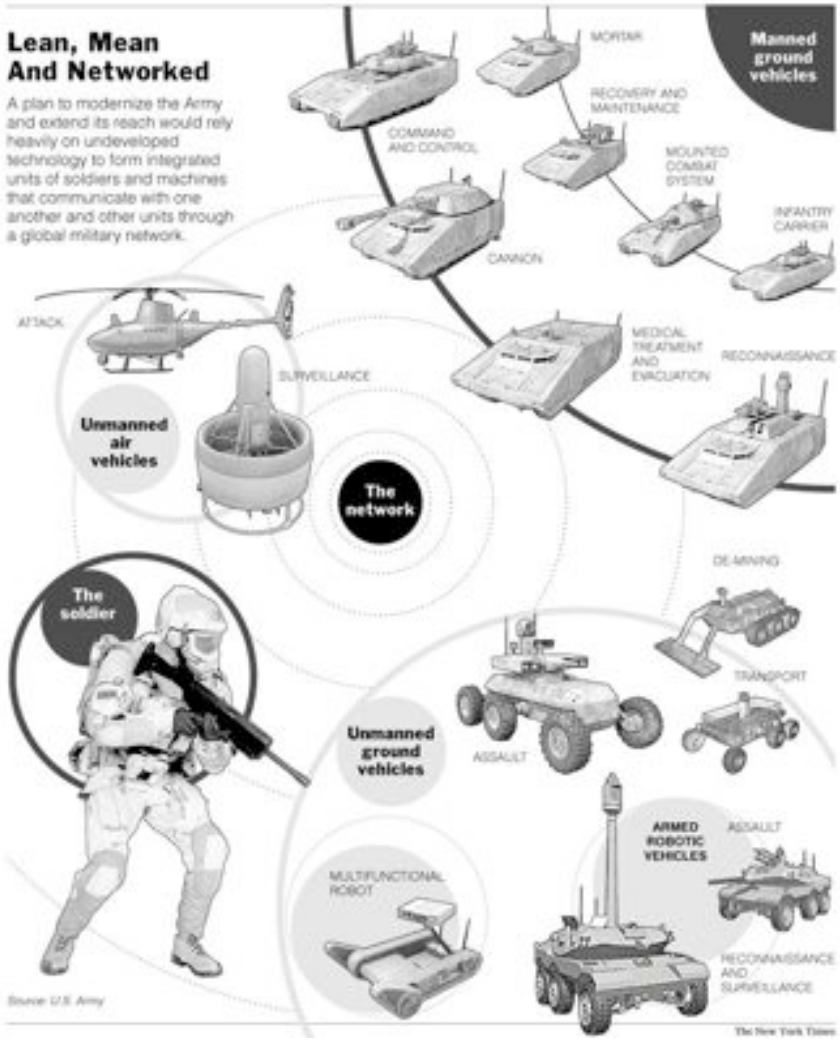

Figure 3.3: A 2005 rendering of the U.S. Army's modernized and networked force[72]

[72] Image from: http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/28/politics/28weapons.html

Figure 3.4: The U.S. Army's Future Combat System (as of 2006)[73]

Figures 3.5: Loading screen from *Advanced Warfighter I*

[73] Image from: www.combatreform.org/fcsnetworkfantasy.jpg

Information and communication technologies are of particular importance in realizing Clancy's brand of military fantasy because they mediate the player's identification as the games' counter-terrorism agents (as Scott Mitchell in the *Advanced Warfighter* games, and as Logan Keller in *Vegas* and Bishop in *Vegas 2*). Central to this process of identification is the avatar's heads-up display (HUD). This visual display is awash with digital markers and screens, enabling the gamer to see the hostile terrain as a cybernetic weapons system might see it. During any one mission, the player may need to synthesize or triangulate the data gathered by a UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) or spy drone, her camera-equipped teammates, and weapons that can see through surfaces. Once the player has successfully gathered the necessary battlefield intelligence, and positioned their ghosts, the player engages the enemy force. (*Advanced Warfighter* also advances its narrative via the heads-up display – instead of relying on cutscenes, or pre-rendered interstitial cinematic sequences – which keeps the player firmly immersed in that world from that soldier's position).

Figure 3.6: Information is mapped over worldly elements in *Advanced Warfighter II*

The *Advanced Warfighter* games' technothriller narratives and its underlying technowar discourse, in concert with their computational rules and operations, wield rhetorical conviction concerning the efficacy of future warfighters and their weapons. The player will have either achieved success or will have failed after engaging the enemy (commercial war games typically do not allow for ambivalent or ambiguous outcomes). Whether the narrative moves forward or not, these bifurcated pathways tacitly posit that victory *is* achievable. The question is instead: can the gamer play like a well-trained technowarrior? Or, more to the point: can the player perform like a classically trained Tom Clancy hero? Having to adopt a game's play logic to win is a basic component of interactive fiction. However, it assumes unique political dimensions for Clancy's video games because the games present the player with all the necessary tools for enacting a state of military "overmatch," where a technologically aided team can overcome

considerable odds (Thomson, 2009).[74] It is therefore up to the player to determine how to allocate and utilize those technological and human resource advantages. And while these tactical shooters are not role-playing titles with deep levels of character customization, players nevertheless experience how their gameplay choices – including which weapons to use and which paths to take – have distinct effects, contributing to the games' processes of player-avatar identification.[75]

The Clancy properties are ideologically comforting because they posit that overmatch victories, challenging as they may be, are possible with the proper application of advanced weapons systems and the will to use said technologies. The firefights in the novels, films, and games gain credibility because they resonate with what gamers already know of the application of advanced technology in current military engagements; i.e., gameplay modality as a set of claims about the world. "As [George Bush's Secretary of State Donald] Rumsfeld argued in testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2003, 'In the twenty-first Century, 'over-matching power' – the ability to field a small

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[74] Thomson (2009) rightly notes that: "In computer games, the development of the hero narrative from underdog to overmatch, and the representation of war which they present, has therefore mirrored developments in real U.S. military policy and the way in which the U.S. fights its wars" (p. 96).

[75] In his study of player identity in role-playing video games, Zach Waggoner (2009) argues that making choices is a critical affective component for understanding how players connect with video games and their virtual characters. He strikes a key distinction between agents and avatars – players' two main types of in-game digital proxies. Players can modify avatars in terms of their appearance or their function, whereas agents cannot be altered (e.g., Pac Man, Frogger). The Clancy warriors – Mitchell, Keller, and Bishop – are avatars since they can be outfitted with a range of weapons and can be accompanied by teammates with different proficiencies. In turn, these personalized choices inform and shape how the gamer approaches the mission and explores the game space.

but technologically superior force – is more important than 'overwhelming force'" (Kagan, 2006, p. 346 qtd. in Thomson, 2009, p. 97). Clancy's immersive war games wield their rhetorical conviction because their textual modality *seems* to represent accurately advanced weapons systems and simulate Special Forces field tactics. These games are pleasurably affecting, however, because the player makes the key choices enabling the overmatch military fantasy to come to fruition.

Identifying as a cyborg weapons system is central to the ludic war pleasures of the *Advanced Warfighter* titles. However, there is nothing particularly new about the fantasy of playing with defense weapons. Cultural historian H. Bruce Franklin (2008) documents how the American imagination has long been shaped by its obsession with superweapons from at least the late nineteenth century, and the formative role that science fiction has played in the development of foreign policy and defense projects. The cultural historian states of the occasional fine line between the George W. Bush administration's neo-conservative consultants and sci-fi authors:

> The New American Century authors become truly ecstatic as they project their images of war in space, from space, and in cyberspace (which their report calls cyber-war). Here it becomes truly difficult to distinguish between this strategic document and the Robert Heinlein – Ben Bova – Jerry Pournelle – Newt Gingrich branch of ultra-militaristic and technophiliac science fiction. But that science fiction had already become a part of the Pentagon's strategic vision of the twenty first century. (Franklin, 2008, p. 219)

And herein lies the cultural currency of the Clancy name. The author's brand is not *just* a recognizable marketing construct that taps into a proven generic formulae or consumer demographic (though it is that too); the name signals the rules for how its games are to be designed, and the virtual worlds that might be imagined. (Even in projects where Clancy

is not invoked, his brand of technothriller fiction often features prominently in the visual design or political imaginary – from televised recruitment ads for the armed forces to policy literature penned by the Project for the New American Century).[76]

If the fantasy of playing with weapons of mass destruction is nothing new for American culture, then what is perhaps innovative about these games is that they transform the player into a fantastically "smart" weapon. The gamer is not some weapon of *mass* destruction; instead, she is a weapon of *exact* destruction. The games celebrate U.S. technological exceptionalism by modeling for the player the precise martial power of the near-future, communications-rich cyborg warrior that is able to overcome considerable obstacles. In a similar vein, Randy Martin (2007) sees the ICT-rich strike forces – represented in the Clancy shooter games by the Ghosts and Rainbow Six teams – as the inevitable outgrowth of postmodern warfighting techniques and a defense production logic where the massive military presence has been replaced "with a customized force configuration, managed informatically" (p. 77). *Advanced Warfighter* perpetuates a simulational mythology of a long-standing military fantasy that sees next-gen technologies as liberating Americans from excessive losses of "blood and treasure." By playing as Capt. Scott Mitchell, the *Advanced Warfighter* games imbricate the player's actions with the fantasy of technological exceptionalism (that the fail-proof and

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[76] For example, the Air Forces' "It's not science fiction" campaign, which melds high fidelity computer generated worlds with footage of real world operators and soldiers, purposefully conflates physical and virtual worlds. The ads suggest that the Air Forces' current generation of warfighting technologies are more advanced than they are in practice, and more closely resemble futuristic video game gear. See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiB3vrhPDNs&feature=related; and: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfAHw1kTpvY&feature=channel

sci-fi futuristic technologies allow one to overcome incredible odds) by equipping her with the tools and training to enjoy super-human vision and knowledge. Martin describes how the military's ICTs produce a more precise and lethal defense actor:

> …now computer modeling has been decentralized from the decision makers pushing the button for nuclear attack to the soldiers in the field. The network is meant to integrate people and things, machines and marines, labor and capital by converting the activities of all into the measurable output of information flows. Transformation, according to a statement by George W. Bush at the start of the Iraqi occupation, figures a military future "defined less by size and more by mobility and swiftness, one that is easier to deploy and sustain, one that relies more heavily on stealth, precision weaponry and information technologies" (2007, p. 76).

This massive military transformation is defended on the grounds that surgical interventions that leverage ICTs and computing technologies can be used to preemptively protect a range of global interests, while sidestepping political blowback like the "Vietnam Syndrome." Technological exceptionalism is generally justified as working in the service of the U.S.'s political exceptionalism; or "how we fight" in the twenty-first century makes sense in light of "why we fight."

WHY WE FIGHT: NAVIGATING POLITICAL EXCEPTIONALISM IN *RAINBOW SIX: VEGAS*

> "If there's a one percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response," Cheney said. He paused to assess his declaration. "It's not about our analysis … It's about our response."
>
> -- Vice-President Dick Cheney (Suskind, 2006, p. 62)

If the *Advanced Warfighter* games imagine what future, counter-terrorism warriors look like and how it is they visualize their technologically-enhanced operations, then the gameplay modality of the *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas* games articulate in

forceful narrative and spatial terms why these types of soldiers and their preemptive actions are a post-9/11 necessity. Like the *Advanced Warfighter* titles, the *Vegas* games are squad-based tactical military shooters that let the gamer play with cutting-edge (though less futuristic) weapons and equipment. The *Vegas* titles differ mainly from the *Warfighter* games insofar as they present their 3-D levels through the first-person perspective (the game switches to a third-person point of view when the player finds protective cover), and the firefights occur largely in interior spaces rather than in open-air locales. Moreover, and as the titles suggest, these games focus on engaging terrorists on U.S. soil, rather than fighting them elsewhere (as is the case in *Advanced Warfighter*). The box art on the first *Vegas* game promotes its action thusly:

> Las Vegas. The entertainment capital of the world. Thousands of unsuspecting tourists visit each day. Thousands more call it home. But on this day, something has gone terribly wrong. The Strip has become a battleground. Fremont Street is no longer safe. And casinos are being blown up one by one. On this day, Rainbow Six is the city's last hope. (Ubisoft, 2006)

This franchise holds out the chance of saving the homeland from terrorists who have targeted civilians and domestic infrastructure. And like the positive framing of the future weapon systems in *Advanced Warfighter*, proceeding through the domestic spaces in the *Vegas* games produce a terrorized "story map."

Building on the idea of the cognitive map, game scholar Michael Nitsche (2008) proposes the concept of the "story map" to explain how players experience virtual game spaces (pp 227-232). Whereas a cognitive map is a mental interpretation of a fictional or real space's characteristics or dimensions, Nitsche's story map explains how players make sense of virtual realms when they are experienced in concert with immersive and

narrative elements. According to Nitsche, "In contrast to the cognitive map generated primarily for orientation, a story map aims not at an accurate understanding of Euclidian space but of spatialized drama and its setting; it combines navigation of drama, film, and interactive space" (p. 230). The story map is therefore neither an "objective" rendering of a game space, nor is it even principally about space; instead, the story map is the experiential whole of navigating a game's architectural and spatial design while making sense of the story and other dramatic elements that narrate that exploration.

The *Vegas* franchise engenders a decidedly fearful story map by having the player navigate the horrors that could be visited upon a major U.S. city ravaged by a well-organized and well-funded terrorist group that was not stemmed by sufficient political caution. In the games' near-future narratives, transnational terrorists are planning to destroy domestic infrastructure (the attack on the Nevada Dam [read: Hoover Dam] in *Vegas*), and have smuggled chemical weapons into the country (in *Vegas 2*). The games' terrorized spaces present a series of object lessons (or perhaps more accurately, object simulations), of the failure to guard absolutely against such potentialities; potentialities articulated most clearly by Vice-President's Cheney's famous "one percent doctrine." Journalist Ron Suskind describes the former VP's conservative and distinctly Clancy-esque view of international terrorism as follows:

> A rogue state might slip a nightmare weapon, or a few pounds of enriched uranium, to a nonstate actor – a *transnat* – if it could be assured that the weapon's country of origin was undiscoverable. And why not? Let the terrorist do the dirty work that some secret sponsor would never do in its own, but maybe had dreamed of: *Bring America to its knees*. Cheney's response: If there was even a one percent chance of such an act occurring, we must act as if it's a certainty. (emphasis in original, Suskind, 2006, p. 65)

The civilian spaces that are explored over the course of *Vegas*' missions include downtown city streets, flashy casinos, high-end hotels, and recreation and convention centers. The tactical exploration of these residential and business spaces, which contain scant hints of their former humanity – ringing telephones, abandoned coffee cups, splattered blood on cubicle walls, and fleeing civilians and frightened hostages – engenders a terrorized story map that at once reflects the procedural dictates of the military shooter genre and conservative technothriller fiction, while indicting any policy that second-guesses the necessity of swift responses to any and all perceived threats.

Thinking about the modality of game spaces and story maps can be difficult for at least two reasons. First, as Nitsche notes, the descriptive metaphors that we use to explain spaces are not without their inherent linguistic baggage (2008, Chapter 11). Games described as a "sandbox," "playground," or "garden" are not meaningless labels, but they more accurately describe the experiential quality of a space, not its delimiting structure for in-game movement. The critical and commercial hit *Grand Theft Auto 4* (2007), for example, is a "sandbox" action adventure game where the player is free engage in different actions: from completing narrative-based quests, driving around the city causing havoc, or peacefully sightseeing as a tourist might. The game's synthetic city is called a virtual sandbox because it accommodates a variety of play choices.

A second reason why describing the architectural layout of a game space is challenging is because the virtual world is often experienced alongside a host of narrative and representational elements. Like continuity editing in film and television, the detailed

and layered narrative-driven spaces in the Clancy games are erected to hide the games' computational artifice. (Of course, it is precisely *because* of this complex layering that the games can be experienced as impressionistic story maps).

The governing spatial structures in Clancy's *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* shooters closely resemble arena spaces. Both franchises place the counter-terrorism squad at some insertion point – in *Ghost Recon* it is usually in an open-air location, for *Rainbow Six* a multi-leveled building complex – where the player is tasked with completing the objectives en route to the extraction point. According to Nitsche, "the arena's spatial arrangement often supports events such as battles, dances, or speeches that demand skillful operation of the avatar, often in collaboration or competition with others" (2008, p. 183). The tactical exploration of Las Vegas' residential and business buildings transforms the municipality into a series of mini-arenas where the gamer test and re-tests her equipment and skills against enemy forces.

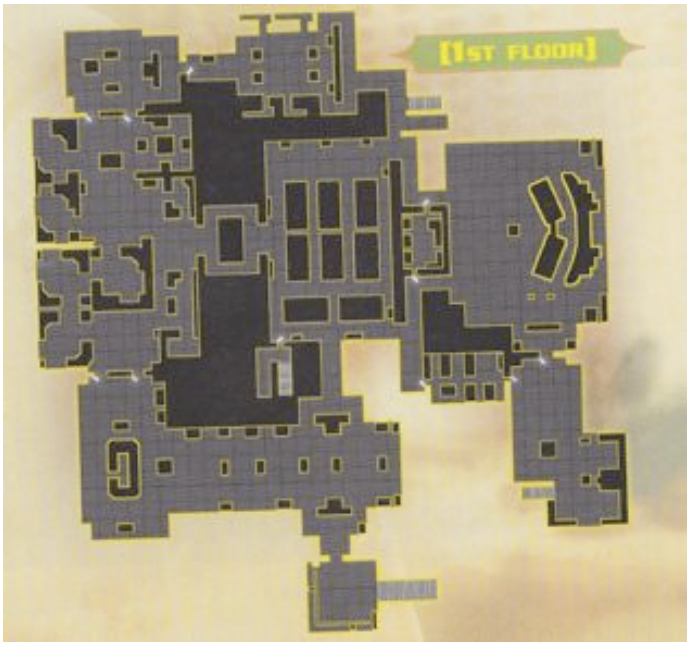

Figure 3.7: An overhead schematic for *Vegas 2*'s arena-like Convention Center[77]

The repetitive firefights performed in *Advanced Warfighter and Vegas*' arenas differentiate these games from other military shooters that possess linear or track-like structures. For example, the *Call of Duty* titles examined earlier offer considerably more restricted environments where gamers are led down relatively narrow paths. These guiding structures, which Nitsche calls "tracks" or "rails," emphasize the need for accurate firing and frenetic movement (not carefully timed movements and coordinated attacks), and thus color differently the player's experience of these virtual wars. A closer examination of dramatic moments from *Vegas 2* will make clear how a Clancy-brand story map comes to fruition by uniting narrative action with virtual spaces.

In *Vegas 2*, the gamer plays as Bishop[78], a Rainbow Six veteran who has been reinstated to combat the terrorist menace seizing Las Vegas. The player leads her three-person squad through a series of engagements in and around the city; the overwhelming number of which include killing terrorists, disarming bombs, and rescuing hostages. At the game's midpoint, Bishop's team traces a chemical bomb to the Hawkins Recreational Facility, a large exercise complex. The player then fights her way through the facility's offices, gymnasium, and courtyards. As Bishop's squad nears the recreation center's stadium, the terrorists trigger their chemical weapon, killing the unseen civilians sealed inside. The player is too late. She must watch as the deadly gas leaks out of the

[77] Image from: Prima Games, 2008, p. 137.
[78] Bishop has no stated first name because the player chooses the avatar's gender at the beginning of the game.

building's locked doors and listen to the off-camera screams. This nightmare scenario is one of the game's most affecting scripted events precisely because it is off limits to exploration.[79] True to the politics of the technothriller, the player bears witness to the horrors of ineffective or late intervention.

Figure 3.8: The player's team fails to rescue the stadium of civilians in *Vegas 2*

Another remarkable sequence immediately follows the stadium massacre, as Bishop's team pursues Miguel Cabrero, one of the terrorist leaders through a residential section of the city. The player's team moves swiftly from one backyard to the next, killing the terrorists aiding Cabrero's escape. These middleclass backyards have been transformed into *de facto* arenas for tactical combat. Bishop warns the team: "Check your fire. Do not hit the houses." (Yet there is no penalty for shooting houses as there is for killing civilians; in fact, there is a distinct advantage to shooting the outdoor grills' propane tanks to wound nearby enemies). The level design here is peppered with an array of household items – grills, bicycles, flower planters – while the audio track

[79] Meaning, no matter how well the gamer plays, the hostages cannot be saved.

contains the off-screen noises of barking dogs and crying babies. This level emphasizes that the wars on terrorism know no bounds. The *Vegas* story maps maintain that if we are to be victorious, we must possess the willingness to allow Special Forces to finish the fight wherever it takes them – including our backyard patios and gazebos.

There is also at least one level in *Vegas 2* that presents the War on Terror as a professional game, and recognizes its players as would-be recruits. As Bishop's team tracks down the terrorists through the Las Vegas International Convention Center, they move through what is unquestionably the game's most self-referential level – an exhibition hall hosting a Major League Gaming (MLG) event. The MLG is a professional video gaming league where players compete for cash prizes and professional sponsorship. To the untrained eye, the exhibition hall may appear to be just a room full of tables and computers. However, dedicated gamers and fans of competitive electronic sports recognize that these networked computers are for high-speed gaming competitions, and that the exhibition room, adorned with MLG ads, looks remarkably like an official competition venue. *Vegas 2*'s publisher, Ubisoft, crafted the game's LAN-inspired multiplayer map after consulting with the MLG, and the league has since adopted *Vegas 2* for its online competitions (De Matos, 2008, n.p.). To clarify about this self-referential and "hall-of-mirrors"-like play space: competitive gamers in the physical world are playing as soldiers in Clancy's technothriller universe, and these avatars are virtually fighting in a room that represents competitive gaming competitions.

The convention center's MLG room in the single-player campaign and its multiplayer map illustrate the persistently blurry lines that have come to characterize the

military-entertainment complex. Yet there is something else afoot here as well. The MLG stage is more than just product placement for the league because it interpellates its community of hardcore gamers as potential warfighters. By locating a firefight in a room that supports these competitions, the title recognizes gamers as a group who would likely sympathize with technothriller's basic ideology since they have demonstrated the know-how for actualizing its martial tactics in an array of spaces (including a game room!).

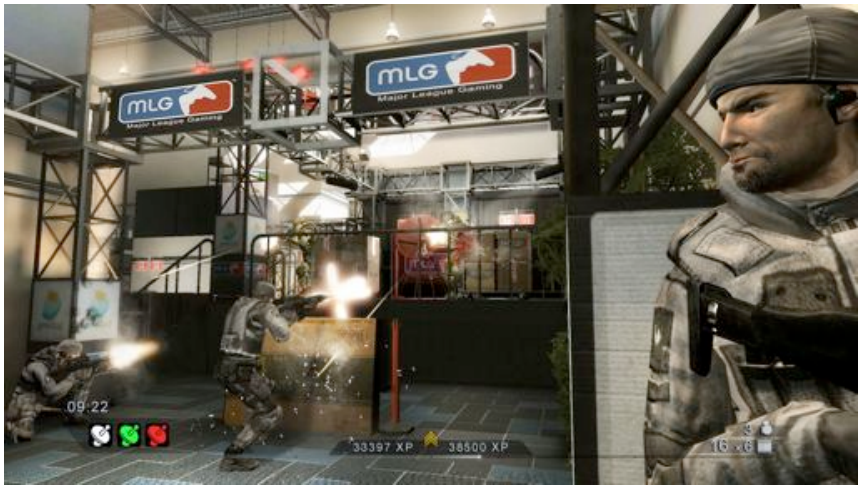

Figure 3.9: Avatars fight in an exhibition hall hosting a MLG event[80]

[80] Image: http://media.mlgpro.com/site/images/features/r62_screens/RSV2_NG_MLG_Conquest_02.jpg

Figure 3.10: The stage at a 2007 MLG competition in Charlotte, North Carolina[81]

Vegas' story maps posit that preemptive military interventions are a post-9/11 necessity, and legitimize interventionist policy ideals like Cheney's "one-percent doctrine." The former VP's doctrine promises freedom from "slow-footed, hedged, evidence-based analysis," and because, as Suskind explains, "There was certainly a one percent chance that [Iraq, Afghanistan, and] such regimes might have weapons of mass destruction and might give them to terrorists. We, then, must act as if it's a certainty" (2006, p. 81). The *Vegas* games teach us that no domestic space – public meeting spaces, game rooms, and even our own backyards – are safe from these terrorists and their WMDs. "Fortunately," all of these spaces are equally transformable into tactical battle sites. The games' procedural rhetoric maintains that with the right application of strategy and technological support, there is no space that cannot be secured by American forces.

[81] Image: http://www.gotfrag.com/files/upload/mlg_stage.jpg

The lessons of *Vegas'* gameplay modality communicates that avid gamers are uniquely qualified to participate in future wars on terror, and that they can attest to the virtues of American exceptionalism since they have experienced the efficacies of preemptive war.

SOCIETY MUST BE DEFENDED – PREEMPTIVELY: CLANCY GAMES AS GAMES OF EXCEPTION

"Knowing these realities, America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof – the smoking gun – that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud."

– Pres. George W. Bush in Cincinnati, Ohio on Oct. 7, 2002

"If we have actionable intelligence about high-valued terrorist targets and if President Musharraf (of Pakistan) will not act, we will."

– Pres. Barak Obama during Presidential Debates, August 2007

The games examined in this chapter and the last do more than visually narrate why America fights preemptive wars. These games likewise demonstrate how postmodern conflicts are to be conducted and how such actions reflect reigning foreign policy beliefs after 9/11. The *Advanced Warfighter* and *Vegas* games, more so than other military shooters, model the value of technologies to transform disciplined soldiers into elite technowarriors who can win on tomorrow's battlefields and secure the political promises of American exceptionalism.

The procedural rhetoric of these games is not limited to their high-tech interfaces or story maps, however (though the characters, settings, and mechanics are constitutive elements in the franchises' commercial appeal). What sets these Clancy games apart from other shooters is that they remediate the author's technothriller genre, enabling the player

to perpetuate the American exceptionalism popularized in his books and films by becoming the elite technowarrior who enforces martially that legal "state of exception."[82]

The Clancy games' hegemonic pleasures are intimately bound up in operating as "exceptional" citizen-soldiers. Clancy's warfighters are exceptional with respect to their weapons systems, communication technologies, and skill sets, and they are exceptional with respect to their legal status. The textual modality of Clancy shooters is pleasurable because players can brandish the surreptitious force that cannot be officially recognized by the government (yet which grants such instrumental actions and agents its legitimacy). And the contextual modality of the Clancy games is pleasurable because it resonates with stories of the U.S. military's actual black op missions. For instance, the assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011 by the Navy's SEAL Team Six (which receives attention again in the Conclusion), required the team to invade Pakistan and the former al-Qaeda leader's compound under the cover of night, and under the cover of legal exception.

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[82] In political theory, the "state of exception" is the sovereign's ability to violate, ignore, or transcend the rule of law under the auspices of ensuring the public good. Contrary to its name, the state of exception is anything but, having now become "the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics" (Agamben, 2005, p. 2). The state of exception does not only concern what is or is not legal for a given regime, but begs foundational questions about the definitional and operational limits of law itself – confusing, for instance, the distinctions between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government – and how ostensibly illegal or extra-legal government actions are situated in relation to the law (e.g., extraordinary rendition and detention, so-called "enhanced interrogation techniques," and powers granted under the October 6, 2001 USA Patriot Act). Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2005) notes: "The state of exception is not a dictatorship … but a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations – and above all the very distinction between public and private – are deactivated" (p. 50).

Figure 3.11: Iconic photograph of Pres. Obama and his staff in the Situation Room monitoring SEAL Team Six's raid on Osama bin Laden's compound[83]

But rather than acting as a ludic aporia that draws attention to the state of exception's legal, political, and ethical contradictions, the Clancy games and similarly designed militainment revel in the pleasures of protecting the state's democratic rules of law by acting autocratically beyond those laws. Political and moral contradictions of modality cannot always be ignored in militainment, however. The next chapter examines the challenges that marketers face when selling the public on playing ludic war during a time of international conflict, and the strategies these firms pursue to minimize negative associations that might paint them and their wares in a negative light.

[83] Image: http://cdn.moxiebird.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Obama-Osama-bin-Laden-situation-room.jpg

SECTION II:

SELLING LUDIC WAR

Chapter Four

Marketing Military Realism: Framing Modality in *Call of Duty 4*

INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates the fine line that video game marketers tread when selling the pleasures of playing ludic war. Marketing materials are vital sites for critical media inquiry because these paratexts prime would-be player-consumers for how they should understand these games, and (more importantly for producers' purposes) why it is they should buy them. Contemporary video war games are typically advertised as offering players ever-increasing levels of visual and aural realism and computational verisimilitude. However, because simulation fever – a type of moral panic concerning media modality discussed shortly – is latent in all games and is of particular concern to titles that trade in simulated violence, military-themed games must be packaged in such a way that celebrates acceptable technological or aesthetic attributes, elements like algorithmic sophistication or an attention to historical specificity, while sidestepping issues that might spur critical reflection about war games' inability to model the social reality that attends to worldly conflict. Commercial video games about military interventions are rarely if ever sold on their ability to prompt gamers into reflecting critically about how the combat scenarios are represented for their enjoyment. Instead, one is only supposed to think about select aspects of combat while playing a war game. A close examination of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*'s key marketing paratexts – production personnel interviews, press reviews, and online video advertisements – prefigure how "military realism" is ideally understood for this, the best selling military-

themed video game of 2007 (Klepek, 2008, n.p.). These marketing paratexts not only generate hype and work to drive sales, but as importantly, they also suggest particular textual readings over others with the goal of insulating *Call of Duty*'s war play from interpretations and criticisms that might link the violent play on screen to the worldly violence unfolding in Iraq and Afghanistan. The story of a television ad campaign will bring these points about pleasure, panic and play into finer focus.

"STANDOFF" AND SIMULATION FEVER

With the release of the Xbox 360 game console on May 12, 2005, Microsoft launched its "Jump In" series of television and Internet commercials, inviting viewers to join their newest online gaming experience. The "Jump In" campaign was notable for at least two reasons: the ads did not showcase gameplay footage, and they represented diverse groups of people playing together in the real world. The players depicted in these ads included women, the middle aged, and people of color; demographics not typically associated with video gaming. There was, to be sure, a conspicuous absence of white teenage boys in these spots. The commercials showed public play across urban spaces: in one ad, kids and adults engaged in a citywide water balloon fight; in another, unlikely bystanders literally "jumped" into the action of a Double Dutch jump rope game; a third fast-paced ad showed two groups of young adults bringing their "cops and robbers" game from an apartment to the busy city streets below; and in another ad, hot air balloons delivered a sofa, TV, Xbox 360, and games to the middle of a parking lot, turning the

onlookers into a gathering of gamers.[84] These live action commercials welcomed gamers of all ages to pick up a controller and join the diverse online play. In fact, the "Jump Rope" spot won the "Best of Show-National" and "Mosaic Award" (for multicultural advertising) at the 2006 ADDY Award Gala hosted by the American Advertising Federation. Mark Tutssel, the chief creative officer of the advertising agency Leo Burnett Worldwide, praised the spot, saying: "This extreme Double Dutch jump rope jam metaphorically captures the excitement and social aspect of the new generation Xbox 360" (Xbox Press Release, 2006, n.p.).

Yet the "Jump In" campaign was not wholly successful. The McCann-Erickson advertising agency responsible for the lauded "Jump Rope" commercial also produced a spot called "Standoff" that Microsoft elected not to air in the United States. Anticipating possible domestic backlash, Microsoft ran "Standoff" briefly in Europe instead. A quick description of the spot will explain Microsoft's understandable hesitation.

"Standoff" unfolds in a crowded train terminal. As two young men pass one another, their eyes meet and their glances hold. They continue to stare as they turn to face one another. Suddenly, one man thrusts his arm at the other's face, with his hand shaped like a gun. The other man quickly responds in kind. Another man standing nearby does the same. This action multiplies quickly, spreading like a virus through the station as the traveling population is transformed into a mob of stationary faux-gun-wielding pedestrians. The terminal is at a standstill. The camera cuts aggressively

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[84] These commercials can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFATqCfmgDM&feature=PlayList&p=582758959394B8FC&playnext=1&index=2

between the multitude of tense faces and stiff arms. Suddenly, the man in the original standoff shouts, "Bang!" and the station erupts into a chorus of mouth-made gunfire. People dive for cover, hide behind tables for protection, and collapse after being "shot." The spot ends, as the others do, with the call for us to "Jump In."

Figure 4.1: Travelers size one another up in Microsoft's "Standoff" ad[85]

While we can only speculate as to how this ad *might* have been received by U.S. television audiences, we can more easily appraise why it was not aired in the States. The commercial's depiction of a massive game of Assassin (a.k.a., Gotcha, Killer) provocatively connects the pleasures of mediated gameplay with violence in the real world. That is, play killing and play dying unwittingly but evocatively connects the mediated Xbox video game experience to a moral panic discourse that has hounded the gaming industry since its emergence in the 1970s. This resilient but scientifically

[85] Image from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoA5mC5FgIw

unsubstantiated concern maintains that violent video games are the primary driver for a range of violent acts where teens or young adults are unable or unwilling to distinguish between right and wrong. The April 20, 1999 massacre at Columbine High School is only the most high profile case of heinous crimes that have been supposedly caused, in large part, by violent games.[86] Clearly not wanting to cast its products or services in a negative light by associating it with such controversies, Microsoft shelved the "Standoff" commercial in the U.S. But there is perhaps a deeper reason for Microsoft's "gun shy" attitude toward the "Standoff" ad – namely, simulation fever.

Video game designer and scholar Ian Bogost (2006) coins and defines simulation fever as "the nervous discomfort caused by the interaction of the game's unit-operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player's subjective understanding of that representation" (p. 136). Because any simulation or video game necessarily models some processes and not others, and because there is a potential friction between the way a process is represented with how a user subjectively interprets said process, it potentially produces a state of anxiety in the player. Simulation fever is a subset or variation on the moral panic. Or, to connect this idea directly to this book's concerns: simulation fever is the slippage of gameplay modality, or the incongruity between the game's functioning as a textual operation and its imagined connection (or not) to the

[86] Video game violence and addition to games have been blamed for crimes ranging from theft to murder to suicide. For additional examples of how games have been implicated in these crimes, see: Calvert, 2003; Benedetti, 2007; Buncombe, 2008; Turner, 2008.

player's ideas of reality.[87] Of course, games do not always have to be comfortable mediated experiences; that is, they can purposefully produce negative affect. However, they almost always strive to be consistent and coherent with respect to their organizing design logic. The contextual understanding of simulational media's relation to a lived reality explains why, for example, a flight simulator set in New York City where planes pass effortlessly through buildings could engender states of anxiety, as this modeling disagrees fundamentally with the user's understanding of physics (as well as rekindling thoughts of the September 11 terrorist attacks).

Simulation fever is not an existential ailment restricted to video games; indeed, simulation fever affects non-mediated games too. Bogost states:

> Instead of standing outside the world in utter isolation, games provide a two-way street through which players and their ideas can enter and exit the game, taking and leaving their residue in both directions. There is a gap in the magic circle through which players carry subjectivity in and out of the game space. If the magic circle were really some kind of isolated antithesis to the world it would never be possible to access it at all. (2006, p. 135)

Hence, "Standoff"'s depiction of a spontaneous Assassin game proves simulation fever's nascent potentialility in all physical and virtual social games, which is especially problematic given the ad's playful representations of violence in a public space after 9/11. According to Bogost: "The idea of simulation fever insinuates seriousness back into play and suggests that games help us expose and explore complicated human conditions, rather than offering mere interruption and diversion" (2006, p. 136). The case of "Standoff" likewise demonstrates that simulation fever and moral panics are serious

[87] Note: media modality is partly an "attitude toward an activity and how that activity is situated in relation to what is understood to be the real world" (King, 2008, p. 53).

considerations for game marketing efforts since undesirable gameplay associations jeopardize potential sales by laying bare the medium's representational limitations. All games, mediated or otherwise, must correlate – however incompletely or incoherently – with the player's lived reality (games that fail to communicate are not only unplayable, they are also meaningless). It is this necessary connection to a player's reality that is perpetually threatening to break the magic circle's seductive spell. Thus, during those moments when gameplay processes fail to match a gamer's understanding of similar worldly actions, players may consider difficult or complicated aspects of reality and the game's failure to render it accurately.

Combat video games wherein one can shoot their friends and be shot at, however fantastic and absurd the depiction of violence, is mediated play that threatens to force gamers into a consideration of actual shooting and actual dying. Thinking about taking another's life demands deep and personal introspection – an activity that is most certainly *not* within the typical purview of commercial shooters. It is this potential that the marketers of combat games must guard against, lest their products be seen as raising unpleasant, complicated, and ultimately less profitable questions or feelings for their audiences. The "Standoff" ad, by depicting a scenario in which everyone is an armed enemy, is a type of play that too easily forces considerations of paranoia and violence in a post-9/11 urban space.

REALISM VS. "REALISTICNESS"

Simulation fever in the case of military-themed gameplay highlights dramatically that military realism is *not* military reality. The former is an aesthetic and discursive

category; the latter is a factual state of affairs. As Alexander Galloway argues in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006), near-photo realistic digital representations should not be confused with existential realism. Moreover, video game studies should (following film studies' categorization of realist and neorealist films) be careful to define realist games as those that "reflect critically on the minutiae of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama, and injustice" (p. 75). This chapter adopts Galloway's useful term of "realisticness" understood as a "yardstick held up to representation" (p. 73). Commercial military video games use technological and representational realisticness to deliver viscerally affective experiences. These design attributes do not transform them into realist texts, however, because these games often fail to acknowledge soldiers' lived experiences. Galloway states: "Realisticness is important, to be sure, but the more realisticness takes hold in gaming, the more removed from gaming it actually becomes, relegated instead to simulation or modeling" (p. 73). For a game to be socially realistic, there must be congruence (what Galloway calls his "congruence requirement") between the game's content and the player's subjective context; "some type of fidelity of context that transliterates itself from the social reality of the gamer, through one's thumbs, into the game environment and back again" (p. 78). Galloway illustrates his argument with the anti-Israeli occupation combat games *Under Ash* (produced in Syria) and *Special Force* (published by Hezbollah). Unlike most military games produced in the West, these games are realist texts because Palestinian gamers can play through their political battles on the screens before them. Realism, for Galloway, is more dependent on an invested sense of contextual congruence than any

textual fidelity. That is, these Palestinian first-person shooters are not realist texts because they critique the first-person shooter genre; in fact, they are fairly standard in their gameplay designs. They are instead realist games because they enjoy a deeply meaningful and personal correspondence between what is played and who plays them.

The marketing materials examined presently take the opposite tack; they argue only for the fidelity of the text. The advertised pleasures of playing wars past, present, or future is, in actuality, the pleasure of playing with a delimited textual realisticness, and not elements of a contextual realism that connects the gamer and game to the lived, everyday realities of an outside world. Video game marketing of commercial military shooters largely works to collapse the divide between textual realisticness with any lived understandings of "realism" to argue that their game's attention to technical detail offers the necessary representational and simulational bona fides to engender an immersive reality available to any who might buy their electronic wares. Thus, the marketing campaigns for post-9/11 military shooters are overwhelmingly concerned with selling only select elements of military realisticness: sophisticated enemy artificial intelligence, military weapons and vehicles that act and look like the real thing, and combat that unfolds in authentic theaters of war both historic and those "ripped from today's headlines." The games industry promises its dedicated players and its would-be consumers a near-real combat experience, irrespective of the gamer's personal play context. Said differently, a game that promises military realism purports to tell one all they need to know about war.

Post-9/11 shooters' advertising rhetoric of military realism cuts across its varied marketing materials. This chapter examines how three paratexts – game production personnel interviews, press reviews, and online video game advertisements – prefigure how military realism is ideally understood for *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. This *Call of Duty* installment presents a valuable case study because not only is the game an extremely popular title across gaming platforms and online gaming services – selling well over 11 million units as of February of 2009 for the PC, Xbox 360, Playstation 3, and Nintendo DS systems[88], becoming the second most played multiplayer game on Xbox Live in 2008 after *Halo 3* (Klepek, 2009, n.p.) – but (as was noted in Chapter Two) it is also the first of the franchise to be set in the twenty-first century, inviting players to combat today's post-Cold War terrorists around the globe. The marketing paratexts that circulate around *Call of Duty 4* not only generate excitement for the game and work to drive sales but they also suggest particular readings over others, hoping to inoculate the pleasures of their ludic wars from the threats of game-based moral panics.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMIC UTILITY OF VIDEO GAME PARATEXTS

In *The Meaning of Video Games* (2008), Steven Jones offers media studies one of its first sustained analyses of gaming paratexts. Building on Gerard Genette's concept of the "paratext," or the "multilayered system of frames around a text that helps determine its reception," Jones ably demonstrates that players understand video games as much by

[88] According to Video Game Chartz [vgchartz.com], Activision has sold over 11 million *Call of Duty 4* units for the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 consoles. The sales numbers are higher if one includes the PC and Nintendo DS numbers. In the games industry, any title that sells over a million copies is considered a "blockbuster."

the external material conditions of the title's publication and marketing, as by its internal narration and gameplay design (p. 7). This inclusion of marketing efforts, fan texts, walkthroughs, game modifications, and other associated media ephemera that swirl around a central gaming artifact underscores how meaning-making is always the result of "complex reception histories" (p. 93). Jones is not the first to recognize the utility of Genette's concept, or the power of paratexts in shaping how the center text is interpreted. Television scholar Jonathan Gray assesses how marketing hype (2008) and press reviews (2010) initiate processes of meaning making before media consumers ever lay their eyes, ears, or fingers on advertised goods. Gray states:

> In other words, paratexts guide our entry to texts, setting up all sorts of meanings and strategies of interpretation, and proposing ways to make sense of what we will find 'inside' the text. When viewed as paratexts, hype and synergy become inherently textual and interpretive, therefore, working, as I have said of ads, to create structures of meaning for texts-to-come. (2008, p. 38)

As Gray later quips of the paratext, it is the "text [that] begins before the text" (p. 46). And because paratexts include such a wealth of objects from different producers – from officially sanctioned trailers, to fan-authored art, to third-party action figures – they have the potential to foreclose and/or open up readings for different constituencies.

Marketing paratexts are of particular value to the culture industries' media producers because they help mitigate against a variety of business risks endemic to new media production. This is especially true for a concentrated and oligopolistic video game industry where it is estimated that only a scant 3 percent of games ever turn a profit (Kerr, 2006, p. 45). Video games must depend on paratexual buzz to entice consumers into parting with $50-$60 dollars for a new console title because the industry producers

do not rely principally on ad revenue like the television industry, subscription fees like mobile providers, nor can they expect that ancillary products will make their games profitable over time, as is the case with some Hollywood properties.[89] These industry-specific pressures result in a more conservative production environment where design choices often conform to tested generic formulae and appeal to reliable gamer demographics. The military shooter is, along with sports and role-playing games, one of the stalwart generic categories of console and PC gaming because these titles have been popular among the industry's young, male "hard core" consumer base. Stephen Kline et al. (2003) underscore the pressure to produce sequels like *Call of Duty 4*, stating:

> Software development is a risky business. Most products fail. There are fortunes to be made with pioneering games that break new cultural ground. But for each successful experiment scores crash and burn, taking with them companies and careers. This creates a powerful incentive to stick with the tried and true and ride on the coattails of proven success. The repetitive pattern is reinforced by the fact that game developers are recruited from the ranks of game players. Such asexual reproduction gives game culture a strong tendency to simple self-replication, so that shooting, combat, and fighting themes, once established, repeat and proliferate. (p. 251)

The industry remains comfortable with making its products for and marketing its wares to its hardcore male gaming constituency despite the recent success of the Nintendo Wii console, and family friendly game franchises like *The Sims* (2000), *Rock Band* (2007), and *Wii Sports* (2006) to attract more diverse game playing audiences.

Game marketing campaigns are often as homogenous, safe, and one-dimensional as the titles that have been produced by guys, for guys; ads like Microsoft's "Jump In"

[89] Some game franchises are produced with subscription services and expansion modules in mind, such as the popular massively multiplayer game, *World of Warcraft* (2004).

campaign remain industry anomalies. In *The Business and Culture of Digital Games* (2006), Aphra Kerr calls the myopic discourse that dominates games publications and forums – such as magazines, web sites, and conventions – "hegemonic heterosexual masculinity" (p. 100). In a similar vein, Kline et al. (2003) argue that game production has long been dominated by a state of "militarized masculinity" which is evident in games across genres and platforms (pp. 254-255). The authors note:

> This complex interweaves ingredients that range from shooting and fighting skills to magical spells of destruction, strategic and tactical war games, espionage, and scenarios of exploration and progress culminating in the ability to conquer alien civilization. The elements are dispersed across a very wide variety of genres of gameplay – "shooters," "action," "strategy," "role playing" – and are often combined in "metagenre" syntheses – "role playing plus strategy," "sports plus shooting." But taken together they constitute a shared semiotic nexus revolving around issues of war, conquest, and combat that thematically unites games ranging from *Soulblighter* to *Shogun* to *SpecOps*." (Kline et al., 2003, p. 255)

Kerr's "hegemonic heterosexual masculinity" and Kline et al.'s "militarized masculinity" accurately characterize the prevalence of violent and sexist tropes across the game industry's texts and paratexts, and explain how the economic imperatives constrain gameplay design experimentation and reproduce the restricted discourse. This chapter goes beyond these useful though broad descriptions of military game culture to outline the specific marketing strategies behind the military realism discourse being sold.

Video game marketing generates hype and primes gamers on how they should derive their ludic pleasures. Video game marketing also functions as the preliminary textual interface between producers and consumers. Thanks to a wealth of professional gaming websites and fan sites, players often have access to early gameplay footage, advanced interviews with production personnel, and press previews by game critics

before they ever play the game being hyped. Kline et al. underscore the critical discursive and economic roles played by this paratexual vanguard:

> To say that cultural intermediaries like marketers and designers "dialogue" and "negotiate" with the gaming consumer may seem perverse. But from the point of view of capital, it makes good sense to open up channels to consumers, respond to their criticisms, adapt to their ideas and interests, and translate the information into products. We call this mediated-marketing nexus a negotiation in recognizing that cultural industries especially have been at the forefront of audience and market segmentation research, forging a reflexive circuitry of audience surveillance and an acute awareness of, and responsiveness to, changing preferences, tastes, and subcultures. (2003, p. 252)

Provided there is sufficient time and resources, early gamer feedback may be incorporated into the game design, or the marketing materials may address or preempt outstanding concerns collected from beta play sessions or feedback posted on online forums. This vital interplay between producers and consumers underscores that production and consumption are not monolithic categories but exist in a dialectical relationship, and are connected by a porous techno-social membrane that allow paratexts to move bi-directionally: from producer to consumer, and from consumer to producer.

One can cite numerous cases of this productive back-and-forth dynamic in video game culture. For example, *Counter-Strike* (1999) remains one of the most celebrated computer game modification tales. Originally a community-developed game modification (or mod) for the PC hit *Half-Life* (1998), *Counter-Strike* became such a popular download that *Half-Life*'s publisher Sierra Entertainment bought the project and later packaged the game for retail release, and the game's development studio Valve Software later hired the mod's designers. The *Halo*-based machinima series *Red vs. Blue* is another example of an unofficially produced fan paratext that was later co-opted by the

game's marketers to hype the release of *Halo 3* (2007).[90] One additional "feel good" example of a company responding to its community is the inclusion of the "N0M4D" control scheme in *Call of Duty 4*. Randy "N0M4D" Fitzgerald is an avid gamer and competes on the Major League Gaming circuit. Fitzgerald has been afflicted with the rare muscle and joint disorder Arthrogryposis since birth, and is paralyzed from the neck down.[91] With the aid of a modified controller, Fitzgerald plays video games with his mouth. The game's developer, Infinity Ward, responded to Fitzgerald's request and programmed a control scheme into the game to meet his unique gameplay needs.

The "N0M4D" game controller setting suggests just how valuable maintaining strong ties to a fan community is to video game producers, and the *Counter*-Strike and *Red vs. Blue* examples illustrate how popular fan paratexts are meaning-making (and, in time, could be money-making) texts in their own right. These cases are not just pre-textual window-dressing. Fan paratexts produced by users and advertising paratexts crafted by marketers open channels for communicating concerns valued by each group, and may over time, be co-opted by the other for economic or community-building ends. Yet the important fact remains that the official publisher-driven game marketing is valuable precisely because it is disseminated *before* a game title hits store shelves, and

[90] Beginning in 2003, Rooster-Teeth Productions began creating satirical videos using the *Halo* game engine, and distributed these shorts online. The series had become such a fan favorite that by 2007 Microsoft commissioned Rooster-Teeth Productions to create ads hyping the release of *Halo 3*, which grossed over $170 million during its first 24 hours (Geddes, 2007, n.p.).

[91] See Martini, 2008, for an interview with Randy Fitzgerald.

because it is the first word on how the public should understand the interactive experience. Gray (2008) argues:

> Ads and hype cannot merely demand our consumption: they must buy it with textuality, creating some form of script and meaning for the product or text in question, giving us some sense that this product or text will offer us something in particular. However, if this is so, then many interactions that we have with texts will be set up and *framed* by the hype that we consume; more than merely pointing us to the text at hand, this hype will have already begun the process of creating textual meaning, serving as the first outpost of interpretation. (p. 34)

Call of Duty 4's personnel interviews, press reviews, and viral ads build excitement for the product by prefiguring how would-be players should expect the game to look and operate according to an advertised aesthetic of military realism, while also attempting to avoid or contain potential interpretive "externalities" like the simulation fever affecting Microsoft's Standoff ad.

"…[*CALL OF DUTY 4* IS] GONNA MAKE A WEAK GAMER SOIL HIMSELF…"

It is standard practice for game producers to grant gaming websites and magazines advanced coverage and "sneak peaks" of products under development during the months and weeks leading up to a game's retail release. Such techniques build buzz, generate interest, and allow the producers to extol their wares' virtues before game critics and consumers pass judgment in their columns and with their dollars. The marketing efforts for *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* began in earnest well before its November 5, 2007 North American release date because it was the first of the franchise to deviate from the previous games' popular WWII setting, representing instead contemporary armed conflict in international hotspots. In a host of interviews conducted for game sites, magazines, and cable programs, Infinity Ward's production personnel hyped the game's

aesthetic of military realism and visceral gameplay, while promising gamers that *Call of Duty 4* would remain faithful to the franchise's successful design formula.

In a series of interviews, Grant Collier, one of the Studio Heads at Infinity Ward, discusses wide-ranging aspects of the upcoming game, but spends considerable time describing *Call of Duty 4*'s near-real world setting and political narrative. Collier works to strike a balance between the game's fictional content and the lived reality of contemporary warfare. For instance, he stresses that the game is not "about the war in Iraq … [but instead, *Call of Duty*] is a global conflict" and that the gamer is charged with hunting down a "fictitious villain in a fictitious setting" (Collier, 2007). Collier also rebuffs any characterization of the game as a "tactical shooter," which typically connotes slower pacing and the need to obey strict procedural demands (for example, the *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* franchises discussed last chapter are tactical shooters). Instead, he frames *Call of Duty 4* as a combat-oriented action game in the same visceral vein of the previous titles. He states: "It's going to be an action-packed modern game with rapid redeployment of forces…players being in multiple locations, being able to see multiple types of conflict. It's the battlefield from the soldier to the satellite, and everything in between" (Collier, 2007). During a co-interview with Collier and Hank Keirsey, *Call of Duty*'s military advisor who will be discussed shortly, Keirsey asks Collier on behalf of a Russian journalist why the Russians are "still" the bad guys since they're "not the communists anymore" (Collier and Keirsey, 2007). Collier downplays the negative gamer feedback, saying that this narrative choice has irritated a few who have posted on the site's forums, but that it is important to remember that the game is fictionalizing a

Russian separatist group. It does not, according to Collier, negatively represent Russians citizens or the Russian military. In these promotional videos, Collier leverages his insights on the game's design and his authoritative status as a knowledgeable production head to prefigure the expectations of gamers and critics alike; essentially reassuring would-be consumers that the brand's celebrated style of ludic war remains firmly in place even as Infinity Ward takes their franchise and loyal gamers into the twenty-first century.

Having outlined the fictional aspects of the title's enemies and the non-specific locations of the urban firefights in the Middle East, Collier argues that the game's essential military realism is based on the production team's attention to details like combat tactics, gear, dialogue, and the game's sophisticated visual and audio design. In a particularly striking promotional video that chronicles Infinity Ward's research process, Collier describes how the production team took an educational field trip to the "Marine Air Ground Combat Center" in Twenty Nine Palms, California (it is one of the few training installations where tanks engage in live fire exercises). This video shows marines training in a mock town alongside the game's artists who are taking notes and recording audio and visual data. The clip then alternates between the recorded live-action exercises, and the game development process unfolding on PC monitors to attest to the fidelity between these two worlds. Collier declares emphatically: "Our guys are diehard about being as authentic as possible."

The final segment of this promotional video shows a group of marines visiting the Infinity Ward studio to play a beta version of the game. As Collier tells the story, the visiting marines were defeated easily during their first few matches. However, once they

began communicating and coordinating their assault tactics, they easily outwitted the opposing team of beta testers. Apocryphal or not, the rhetorical power of this final anecdote suggests that even though *Call of Duty 4* was produced outside of the defense community proper, that Infinity Ward has engineered a title that nevertheless enjoys high degrees of military realism because of the generous input of the armed forces, and which has even been Beta-tested by a group of approving soldiers.

Military advisors and subject matter experts play a critical role in the development of war entertainment in general, and in video games in particular. They are not only the members of a production team who ensure that military terminology and protocols find accurate digital expression (see, Payne, 2009), but they are also useful for marketing purposes. Hank Keirsey, *Call of Duty 4*'s military advisor, is a good case in point. Like Collier and the other Infinity Ward creatives, Keirsey is the subject of numerous promotional videos posted before and after *Call of Duty 4*'s release. Keirsey, who has decades of experience with the Army infantry and who has taught history at West Point, began working with Infinity Ward during their creation of their first *Call of Duty* title in 2003. Keirsey's testimonials about the game's two-year development cycle and team's meticulous data collection methods lend credence to the marketing materials' claims of authenticity. In one of the more colorful interviews, Keirsey (2007) remarks: "The game has approached a level of intensity that's gonna make a weak gamer soil himself. It is that good. It's really got a feel for it." His praise continues:

> Someone asked me, "Could you use this game as a rehearsal tool?" And I actually said, "Absolutely. You could, but it's not the intent of the game." The last thing on the mind of the developers was making anything that could be used by the

> Department of the Army or anybody else. But what they did by making the game so authentic … By getting all the physics exactly right, getting the weapons exactly right, the ballistics right, frankly – you know – if you had a hit squad to go in on Osama bin Laden … you could do a hellacious rehearsal. Headset-to-headset, man-to-man. [You] still got to go do it…But the commands, the coordination between people, rehearsing contingencies – [*Call of Duty 4* is] a tremendous engine to do that with. Again, it's unintentional. It just happens to be because [Infinity Ward] made it so close.

Keirsey's testimonial is all the more compelling because of his outsider status as an advisor and because of his personal military experiences.

Another noteworthy theme in Keirsey's interviews is his belief that the *Call of Duty* games appropriately memorialize soldiers' sacrifices. He was reluctant at first to work for a video game company until he saw their "passion" for creating an authentic military past. Keirsey was also initially attracted to the first *Call of Duty* game because the WWII subject matter "taught something about a generation that did amazing things" (Keirsey, 2007). He does not feel any different about *Call of Duty 4*'s depiction of today's soldiers, saying: "I enjoy working with these games because I think they're a tribute to the guys that are doing this for real." This suggestion amplifies the supposed military realism by promising players a way of virtually paying tribute to soldiers by buying and playing the game, and it is quickly becoming a rhetorical motif in the marketing of contemporary military-themed games (e.g., Davison, 2010, n.p.).

These promotional interviews connect technical elements of military realisticness with the *promised* experiential pleasure of playing ludic war, while also containing simulation-based anxieties that could result from the dissonance between knowledge of how modern combat is conducted and how it is modeled in *Call of Duty 4*. Marketing

materials generally hold out the promise for some future reward, but press reviews are another kind of paratextual fare entirely and need not establish such commitments. The reviews of *Call of Duty 4*, while mostly favorable, allude to the anxieties of simulation fever that are largely elided in the developer interviews.

"…MOMENTS [IN *CALL OF DUTY 4*] ARE ALMOST TOO REAL AND PAINFUL TO BEAR…"

If the personnel interviews for *Call of Duty 4* are paratextual testimonies that narrate the developers' commitment to military realism during the game's production phase, then the press reviews are the paratextual evaluations by gaming's official taste experts on how the designers have executed their craft. *Call of Duty 4* earned high aggregate scores of "94" for both the Xbox 360 and PS3 platforms on MetaCritic.com, placing the game in the top 10 of the best reviewed games for both systems (as of February 2009). But professional critics and reviewers do far more than score and rank a game based on in-house rubrics. Press reviews, which are usually penned before the game's release date but are often not published until the game goes on sale, join the chorus of other information that influence how gamers understand a title's place within a genre and marketplace, and whether the player ought to part with their money. Furthermore, as elite and experienced players themselves, game critics also suggest how to best interpret titles' content and gameplay experiences. This section surveys how high profile reviews posted within days of *Call of Duty 4*'s November 2007 release offer strategies for understanding the game's ludic pleasures of military realism and how gamers might appreciate the technical sophistication of the simulated violence without succumbing to the game's negative affective elements.

The reviews for *Call of Duty 4* are nearly uniformly pleased with Infinity Ward's decision to transport the franchise from its WWII theaters to modern day combat zones. Making the title's armed conflict timelier also makes the game more relevant to players' social experiences (potentially increasing its social realism). As Gamespot.com's former editor Jeff Gerstmann (2007) puts it, "By bringing things into a fictionalized story that still seems fairly plausible, the developer has made a much heavier game" (n.p.). "Heavier" in this context probably means that the game is more personally affecting for gamers who may know soldiers serving overseas, or for those who may have served or are currently serving.

Besides the diegetic universe's fictional but no less horrifying terror plot, this game saw graphical and gameplay improvements over *Call of Duty 3* (2006). The reviewers seem most comfortable with praising the game's technical achievements. For instance, in Hilary Goldstein's review for IGN.com, the critic writes:

> This is a gorgeous game from top to bottom. It runs almost perfectly, with only a few rare frame rate hiccups, and offers rich details, great texture work, excellent animations for your allies, awesome particle effects, and some stellar lighting. The sound is equally impressive. Combat is loud. The shouts of your allies, the curses of your enemies, the ominous clink of a grenade falling at your feet, all go to creating an immersive experience. You may well lose yourself in combat, drawn in by the visuals and the sound. This is a technically excellent effort that won't disappoint. (2007, n.p.)

And Gamedaily.com's Chris Buffa (2007, n.p.) strikes a similar note in his review:

> To play COD4 is to admire it. Not only does it play remarkably well, but it looks and sounds gorgeous. Its powerful scenes of civilians getting executed and buildings crumbling strikes deep in the hearts of anyone that pays attention to the daily new [*sic*]. The way soldiers clear rooms and the mission in which you safely bomb terrorists from hundreds of feet in the air reminds us of the shows on the Discovery Channel. We find ourselves both amazed and terrified at the detail,

> how characters move like actual human beings, how weapons look and sound exactly like their real-life counterparts and the screams of pain, anger and joy.

But perhaps the most literal game review is a video feature produced by IGN-Australia that compares the virtual *Call of Duty 4* guns to their real-world counterparts at a Las Vegas gun store (IGN, 2007). In this video, the IGN reporter test fires numerous pistols and assault rifles, as the video alternates between the live action demonstration and the game's firefights. The host explains the pros and cons of each weapon (e.g., accuracy, power, recoil, etc.), and how Infinity Ward brought their digital weapons to life.

Figure 4.2: IGN.com correspondent at a gun range[92]

This video's quite literal comparison between worldly arms to their ludic proxies assumes an unproblematic correspondence and fidelity between the real and the virtual. What comparisons like this and, indeed, the marketing efforts of military realism ignore are the implications for how players understand the experiences of the game's virtual soldiers, and how that understanding informs what they know of actual soldiering. This is, in other words, the key difference that Galloway strikes between textual realisticness and

[92] Image from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2LCB9228uY

social realism; it is the fiction between textual and contextual modalities. Marketing paratexts are far more likely to advertise how the game represents the details of modern war machinery – the physical setting, the political era, or the ability of the development team to craft a compelling ludic war experience (i.e., the military realisticness) that closely resembles other war entertainment – than it is to sell the gamer on the equally boring and horrifying social reality of conducting war. The parodic news source, *The Onion*, offers perhaps the keenest and most humorous insight into *Call of Duty*'s inability to model the social reality of war when they reported on the, then, fictional *Modern Warfare 3*, in which players will spend most of their time "hauling equipment," "filling out paperwork," and "complaining about how bad the cell phone reception is" (Onion, 2010, n.p.). *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* is, however, no longer a fictional joke; it will hit store shelves on November 8, 2011.

Figure 4.3: Soldiers complain about poor phone reception in *The Onion*'s fictional *Modern Warfare 3*[93]

[93] Image from: http://www.theonion.com/video/ultrarealistic-modern-warfare-game-features-awaiti,14382/

Unlike the personnel interviews, the game reviewers did grapple with the subjective discomforts of playing a military game during a time of war, and how *Call of Duty 4*'s more haunting moments engender moments of simulation fever. Chris Buffa of Gamedaily.com echoes Keirsey's comments about the game's brutality as being an interactive testament to the valor and sacrifice of today's soldiers. Buffa states:

> Combat is visceral and unrivaled. You've never experienced anything more vicious and unforgiving. Rockets zip past your head, attack choppers shred nearby houses with gunfire, jets carpet bomb an area, tanks blast through walls and soldiers fall by the hundreds. The insanity, coupled with your character's inability to absorb as may hits as in other games (*Halo 3*, *Bioshock*), causes you to question your actions and rethink strategies. Bottom line, if this game represents even just a fraction of the hell actual soldiers deal with on a day-to-day basis, we have a newfound respect for the armed forces. (2007, n.p.)

Call of Duty 4 has been praised for introducing particularly stark battles and scenes into the single-player narrative that underscore the ugliness of war. Recall the game's bleak credit sequence as described in Chapter One when the gamer plays as President Al-Fulani, the kidnapped leader of an unnamed Arab county, who is escorted to his televised execution. The player is powerless to do anything other than to look helplessly around during this sequence. "Through the eyes of Al-Fulani, you watch as [the terrorist, Khaled] Al-Asad raises a gun to your face; a gunshot rings out and the screen quickly fades to black" (Moses, 2007, n.p.). Gamepro's Travis Moses punctuates his description of the execution, stating, "Because of [*Call of Duty 4'*s] near-photorealistic visuals, moments such as this are almost too real and painful to bear but it again reinforces Infinity Ward's ability to expertly engage both the body and the mind" (2007, n.p.). Andrew Pfister of

EGM/1up.com argues similarly that despite the potential for an unpleasant approximation of current military action in the Middle East – a "delicate issue being addressed in a medium best known for 'dude, blow something up'" – that because of Infinity Ward's past experiences in making WWII games, that they have struck the right tone of military realism for playing the current Global War on Terror.

> But as any *Call of Duty* fan can tell you, the people at Infinity Ward are skilled storytellers and masterful scenarists. It's because of this that *Modern Warfare* finds itself in the company of movies like *Black Hawk Down*, rife with intense portrayals of serious and complicated situations that, though perhaps not entirely realistic, still convey to the rest of the nonenlisted world how war might feel: completely f***ed up. (Pfister, 2007, n.p.)

The sacrifice and professionalism of the Marines and British S.A.S. forces (the two squads the gamer plays as in the single-player campaign) are presented in the press reviews as morally righteous actors even if the limited military interventions themselves fail to enjoy the same mythological gravity as WWII campaigns. The press reviews recognize elements of simulation fever that attend to playing wars ripped from today's headlines, and the need for smart design when crafting ludic wars based on recent events. However, the game journalists diffuse any concerns over this subjective tension by celebrating the moral virtues of armed service personnel, and the efficacy of Infinity Ward to update their award-winning franchise without falling prey to simulation fever. The major press reviews largely reinforce the claim delivered in the *Call of Duty*'s major TV spot: "Wars change. Weapons change. Soldiers don't."

"VERY FUN GAME, AMERICAN SCUM."

Call of Duty 4's "World Leaders" web videos illustrate just how important fan-authored paratexts have become to the efforts of video game marketers. The amateur-looking "World Leaders" videos star five international politicians typically vilified by the mainstream U.S. news media offering their own reviews of *Call of Duty 4.* Like most video reviews that alternate between a talking head and game footage, these satirical shorts contain archival footage of a leader at a press conference, alongside gameplay clips from *Call of Duty 4*. Conspicuously poor broken-English voiceovers play in these off-color spots, and they closely resemble any number of fan videos posted to video sharing sites like YouTube, or bits from late night comedy programs like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or *The Colbert Report*. Indeed, the "World Leaders" videos testify to the assumed value of fan-authored texts to help assure a game's success precisely because of what these videos are *not* – namely, fan-authored texts. These pieces were not crafted by a die-hard *Call of Duty* fan, as is suggested by the host site's somewhat dated appearance (the page's simple layout and repetitive wallpaper background call to mind a MySpace or Geocities page). Rather, the site was engineered by DDB Los Angeles, a successful ad agency and bankrolled by the game's publisher Activision.[94] Additional downloadable content such as the desktop wallpaper graphics and AIM buddy icons featuring the URL hint to site's origins, as do the links to Infinity Ward and Activision. There is no reason to think that this is or will become a popular strategy for marketers. It is more likely one form of viral marketing that firms can surreptitiously deploy to build product buzz.

[94] Conducting a WhoIS request of the website's URL reveals that the site is registered to Activision Publishing.

The pseudo-fan created "World Leaders" project impressed the advertising community. The campaign won numerous awards at the 2008 Belding Awards competition, and it garnered the "Most Attention Getters" and "Don't You Wish You'd Thought of This" awards at the 2008 MI6 Video Game Marketing Conference. According to a blog entry by Paul Sears, an account supervisor with DDB LA, the advertisement's goal was to: "Raise awareness of the game and give gamers a reason to believe that *Call of Duty*'s move from a WWII game to the arena of Modern Warfare was going to make the game even better." Sears continues, posing the rhetorical question: "Who better to endorse *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* than the experts - war hungry world leaders?" (Sears, 2009, n.p.).

The videos feature Russia's Vladimir Putin, Libya's Col. Muammar al-Gaddafi, Cuba's Fidel Castro, Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and a media report issued on behalf of North Korea's Kim Jong-Il. The short pieces are bookended by mock broadcasting slates, most are accompanied by some grandiose nationalistic orchestral score, and these absurdist caricatures assume a familiarity with how these leaders are typically represented by the mainstream U.S. press. Unlike the other *Call of Duty* paratexts, these parodic game reviews acknowledge the centrality of play in game culture – a recognition that is largely absent from the earnest military realism discourse, including the aforementioned interviews and the press reviews.

Play, humor, and textual experimentation are not all that easily commensurable with an advertised military realism that supposedly pays tribute to real soldiers and closely models ballistics and combat tactics. Indeed, play is often disruptive, subversive,

farcical, and irreverent. These videos acknowledge what the gaming community already knows – that gamers engage in all manner of playful behavior during virtual war sessions that are neither realistic nor particularly militaristic. Despite Sears' blog assertion that "war hungry" world leaders make for the best *Call of Duty* advocates, the videos' repurposed archival footage deflate the production personnel's seriousness rhetoric of military realism, and they acknowledge the vibrant fan community that is absent from *Call of Duty*'s major television spots. The World Leaders project signals that fan-authored paratexts are such a critical component for AAA game marketing campaigns, that producers can manufacture fan-look-alike paratexts for themselves and for their fans.

Beyond suggesting a politically aware and creative fan community, the World Leaders pieces also complicate the issue of simulation fever. If this form of moral panic is the subjective discomfort caused by some disconnect between the manner in which a process is represented or simulated, and the way a gamer understands that process to operate outside of the game, then how might such obviously parodic paratexts contribute to any state of simulation anxiety? The answer lies in the paradoxical nature of play itself; a dynamic interplay of reality and fantasy that is manifest in the World Leaders project. First, these videos inject timely political knowledge into the frames of meaning that circulate around the *Call of Duty* franchise, offering players worldly referential pleasures external to the fictitious game characters and nebulous settings (interestingly, the game's sequels unfold in real-world locales). The production personnel and the game make it abundantly clear that *Call of Duty* 4's story and characters are fabricated. Yet the parodic game reviews assume more than a passing familiarity with these leaders'

personas. This crafty piece of advertising delivers contemporary political references in the absurd package of game reviews from world leaders-turned-game critics.

The videos are thus playfully ambivalent about how the paratextual political truths and the textual representations of military realism offer potentially oppositional readings about the game's depiction of international conflict after 9/11. The videos make this friction clear because the driving, fictional conceit is the leaders' mixed reviews of *Call of Duty* is due to the game's *near-real* narrative and setting. For example, Putin gives the single-player mission a negative review because he believes that the idea of stolen Russian nuclear weapons is a "very implausible story" and that he finds the notion "disgusting, like Polish vodka." Similarly, the state-run media correspondent for Kim Jong-Il reports that while the "glorious leader" enjoyed certain aspects of the game – saying "Very fun game, American scum" – that because the game has nukes, "there is no saving Korea. One star." In Castro's review, the Cuban leader says that he has been absent from public view because he has been playing *Call of Duty*. Castro praises the game, saying: "Not since baseball has America given us something this exciting." But due to his health problems and the game's high levels of excitement, his brother Raul is not permitted to play at the same time.

Figure 4.4: Castro playing *Call of Duty 4*[95]

The fictional "complaints" levied about simulation anxiety is most pronounced in the al-Gaddafi's video. The Colonel exclaims:

> Game developers! Come on, you say this is an unnamed Arab country? Fictional? This is Libya. It's obviously Tripoli. Pretending this isn't Libya is as stupid as pretending Liberty City isn't New York. If this isn't Libya, then a camel doesn't poop in the desert. [Silence. Person coughing.] Camel? Pooping in the desert? Like a bear? Nevermind.

Al-Gaddafi continues to identify people and places as the game footage plays. Near the end of the review, he freezes the action and circles Tripoli's beach with a telestrator tool, exclaiming: "You can practically see the hot babes in their tropical-print burkas!"

The Libyan leader's reference to Liberty City, the NYC-look alike in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2007), is not the only intertextual allusion to game culture in these videos. These reviews repeatedly acknowledge a playful game culture largely ignored by the game's "official" marketing materials. For instance, Putin (whose online gamer handle is

[95] Image from: http://www.worldleaderreviews.com/reviews.php

"ShootinPutin187") praises the game's multiplayer design, saying that he has designed his own class of sniper the calls the "Russian Bear." He boasts: "I am silent but deadly, like a Boris Yeltsin fart." According to President Ahmadinejad, Iran has also used the game's multiplayer customization options to develop a new ability to defeat "the Great Satan." Their army's newest order is that of the "anti-tea-baggers" which will protect their soldiers against having their posthumous faces squatted on by their victors.[96] Ahmadinejad's announcement of this new ability is accompanied by a provocative image of a military medal made from twin tea infuser balls.

Figure 4.5: "Anti-Tea-bag" Perk from Ahmadinejad's World Leaders Video[97]

CONCLUSION

The off-color jokes and insider humor that characterize the World Leaders videos is in keeping with Kerr's hegemonic masculinity and Kline et al.'s militarized

[96] "Teabagging" in video games is when one player places their avatar over another and repeatedly squats over the dead avatar's face. Because many shooter games allow the defeated player to be a spectator after their virtual death, victorious players can add insult to injury by performing this act of dominance.

[97] From: http://www.worldleaderreviews.com/reviews.php

masculinity, as this gendered and sexist discourse is aimed at appealing to a reliable, target demographic. Moreover, the celebrated liminality between worldly facts and gaming fiction lessens the potency of any critical protests against *Call of Duty*'s representation of postmodern war. These parodic videos are a preemptive volley by Activision against those who might criticize war games for profiting from contemporary armed conflicts. These advertising paratexts argue that even *if* the advertised game were about real people and places, that there is still nothing to be concerned about because *Call of Duty* is a "game." In effect, these spoof reviews complicate the game's ambivalent politics so as to obscure the game's varied strategies of producing its ludic war pleasures. The World Leaders videos do not eliminate the potential for simulation fever to occur as much as it stigmatizes any allegations of moral panics resulting from taking video games too seriously, or confusing the modality of simulations for reality itself.

Simulation fever, however, is not only some cognitive disconnect or textual ludic anxiety that impacts sensitive gamers during gameplay. These simulation-based moral panics can negatively impact promotional buzz and sales, making it a concern for game developers across game genres[98] (hence the rich variety of publicity paratexts like

[98] One non-military shooter example is the outcry over the publicity materials for the survival horror game, *Resident Evil 5* (2009). The early trailers for this cross-platform and multimedia franchise show Chris Redfield, a white Special Operations officer, shooting Africans who have been infected with destructive parasites. Fans and non-fans voiced their concerns about the game's depiction of a white American shooting diseased black Africans. The game's Japanese publisher Capcom denied any malicious intent and quickly introduced light-skinned infected into subsequent game trailers. The moral panic in this case erupted because game footage was read as allegories of colonialization and the African AIDS epidemic. For a longer discussion this PR dilemma, see Kramer, 2009.

personnel interviews that attempt to foreclose public relations problems). Comically presenting world leaders as *Call of Duty* gamers injects political levity into a game that is purported by its production personnel to be distinctly apolitical but viscerally affecting. The logic of Infinity Ward's personnel seems to operate as follows: if military realism is the sum total of all the military details programmed into the game, then omitting key geo-political facts such as real locations and bodies politic means that the game must be politically neutral. The game's marketers, however, understand that meaning making, hype creation, and sales can be amplified by giving the game community paratexts that acknowledges their insider jokes and affords them the license to disregard the complex politics of representation. For all of its advertised military realism (i.e., its technical realisticness and positive framing of U.S. service personnel), the marketers of *Call of Duty* and other shooters would have you remember that it is, in the end, "just a game."

SECTION III:

PLAYING LUDIC WAR

Chapter Five

"F*ck You, Noob Tube!": Learning the Art of Ludic LAN War

INTRODUCTION

"F*ck You, Noob Tube!"[99] Wait. Me? Oh, no. A gamer had called me out publicly in this, my very first night in the field. Evidently, I had committed some unwritten gameplay foul that marked me as different from the dozens of other video gamers playing *Call of Duty 4* (2007) during LANopolis' all-night gaming session.[100] It would take me some time to finally comprehend what I had done to elicit such a barbed response from a fellow gamer – a young man who I would later come to know as Lee. I will return to this story in the chapter's latter half to answer the related questions: just what is a "noob tube" exactly; and more significantly, why does something like a "noob tube" exist, or need to exist in this venue?

In these two final contextual play chapters, I relate the foremost "lessons" culled from participant observations of numerous gameplay sessions at a commercial computer gaming center, and a focus group conducted at that same site. This first context of play chapter examines the manner in which gamers relate to one another while playing modern military shooters (games like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* [2007]; *Modern Warfare* 2 [2009]; *Call of Duty: Black Ops* [2010]; *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* [2010]; and *Counter-Strike* [2000]) during all-night gaming marathons. The next chapter

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[99] A preliminary version of this chapter appears in my 2010 co-edited anthology, *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (Routledge).

[100] LANopolis is the pseudonym for my research site. The participants' names, as well as the gaming center's title, have been changed to protect partipants' identities.

examines what avid war gamers think makes one a "good" virtual soldier. I am restricting my remarks about the public gameplay at this center to military shooters because these games are among the most popular titles played there (as they are at similar establishments), and it productively limits my observations to the ludic war activity examined over the preceding chapters. It bears underscoring, however, that this is *not* the only play activity that unfolds in this multi-media gaming center. As it will be explained momentarily, the site supports a variety of gaming configurations for a range of media-based activities. This chapter's observations come from field notes collected over eight "all-night" (10 PM to 10 AM) gaming marathons where I participated in various multiplayer video games, numerous afternoon visits during non-peak hours, and from informal interviews conducted with the patrons and with the management of LANopolis. The unofficial rules of waging ludic war in a LAN setting – those play behaviors that avid gamers take for granted – are practices that in some ways reflect the concerns of the shooters game texts explored earlier, as well as those social values promoted by the marketing paratexts. It would be incorrect, though, to suggest that the LANopolis' play conventions that dominate its all-night festivities only result from the shooter texts and their paratexts. This is the part of the ludic war experience where we talk about the gamers and their gameplay. But before discussing my field observations, I should narrate – if briefly – the research lessons I have gleaned from media scholarship about researching video game communities.

STUDYING VIDEO GAME COMMUNITIES

In the inaugural journal issue of *Games and Culture*, Tom Boellstorff makes the case for sociology and anthropology's potential contributions to game studies: in particular, providing frameworks for the cultural theorization of play and the methodology of participant observation (2006, p. 30). Boellstorff contends, citing the work of famed anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, that the value of participant observation (oxymoronic as the term might sound) is it "allows the researcher to study the gap between what people say they do … and what they actually do" (p. 32). Staking these kinds of knowledge claims tempers analyses that might otherwise treat game culture as a structuralist schema radiating from the titles' rules of play. "Such theorizations of culture also further the idea that *culture* is to *game* as *context* is to *text*, making it difficult to ask how in some circumstances games can act as contexts for culture" (emphasis in original, Boellstorff, 2006, pp. 31-32). It is precisely for this reason that this project has not framed the context of play (or any paratext for that matter) as emerging out of the text, but as overlapping constellations of social practices. These mutually constitutive forces exert pressure on the other, but they are rarely, if ever, directly causal. In other words, the text unquestionably shapes gaming culture, but it is not the first and final word; the war game technology is not the base to the ludic war superstructure. Fortunately, a handful of studies have answered Boellstorff's call by using participant and ethnographic methods for describing in careful detail the ways in which technology, imagination, and play practices work together to produce uniquely

affecting mediated experiences which form the basis for the establishment and maintenance of particular gaming communities.

My thinking on how best to conduct my own study of a war gaming community and to what critical end has been shaped by game scholarship that: refutes claims of technological determinism without neglecting questions of power and ideology (Turkle, 1984; Kinder 1991); acknowledges the researcher's interactions with gamers during the fieldwork and its subsequent reporting (Taylor, 2006; Pearce, 2009); looks at ways gamers generate social capital through play (Castronova, 2005; Consalvo, 2007), and the means by which extra-textual elements shape gaming culture (Taylor, 2006; Jones 2008). Although these works do not exhaust the scholarship on the topic, I suspect that they have been formative for a number of games researchers because they share compelling critical and methodological themes. Curiously, it is a classic study of a "paper and pencil" fantasy role-playing community – an ethnographic work that is neither about video games, nor about electronic mediation – which has most shaped my thinking about how the ludic war experience represents its own distinct cultural realm.

In *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983), Gary Alan Fine argues that fantasy role-playing game communities (i.e., "paper and pencil" games like *Dungeons and Dragons*) represent an identifiable subculture because these players use cultural elements to construct their own cultural systems. The sociologist justifies his object of study:

> I researched fantasy role-playing gamers because they seek to develop new and unique cultural systems. Whereas all groups create culture to some extent, most of these cultural systems are limited in scope. Fantasy gamers, on the other hand,

> are explicitly concerned with the development of a cultural system; they judge their satisfaction with the game by the vigor of the culture they created and by the degree to which they can become personally engrossed in it. For a sociologist interested in the interactional components of culture, few groups are better suited to analysis. (p. 229)

He later clarifies this point, stating: "It is not that groups *have* culture, rather they *use* culture to imbue the events in their world with meaning and to create newly meaningful events" (emphasis in original, p. 239). Fantasy gamers, therefore, draw from meaningful personal events and cultural phenomena to make their shared adventures resonant and evocative. Video war gameplay, unlike open-ended fantasy role-playing, is at all times mediated by commercial technologies, which are themselves bolstered by expansive advertising campaigns. It is partially for these reasons that this project has recognized how texts and paratexts contribute to the cultivation of their ludic war cultural system.

Shared Fantasy is also an inspired piece of research (and is an inspirational work for the current project) because it both takes gaming pleasures seriously, and interprets said experiences critically. Fine (1982) remarks:

> For the game to work as an aesthetic experience players must be willing to "bracket" their "natural" selves and enact a fantasy self. They must lose themselves to the game. This engrossment not total or continuous, but it is what provides for the "fun" within the game. The acceptance of the fantasy world as a (temporarily) real world gives meaning to the game, and the creation of a fantasy scenario and culture must take into account those things the players find engrossing. (emphasis in original, p. 4)

For as rule-bound as gaming experiences are, they are not defined solely by their rules. Were this indeed the case, scholars would need only consult a rulebook to understand a given ludic experience. Instead, all social games are potentially rich research sites because they provide analysts with "natural laboratories" for studying how cultural forces

"play out" in a series of fictional scenarios (paraphrase from p. 233). This is why participant observation and ethnographic approaches have proven useful for making sense of gaming culture. Rules say what players can *do* in a game; they do not say what those gamer actions *mean*. Again, Fine: "Only through ethnographic investigation and in-depth interviews can we discover the rules for such games in their behavioral – rather than formal – contexts" (1983, p. 236). For these reasons, the current chapter attends to the "lessons" I, as an outsider, learned from playing virtual war with others in a shared, physical space.

Fine reminds us that, "Fantasy gaming is…a unique social world, treasured for its uniqueness, but like any social world it is organized in ways that extend beyond its boundaries" (p. 242). This is also the case for video war gaming. For the would-be ludic soldier, learning the art of virtual war means recognizing and internalizing the practices that dedicated shooter gamers value and enforce in their community of play. And, for the would-be game critic, it is necessary to connect these play values to a non-ludic world outside of the single gaming center. Welcome to LANopolis.

THE LAY OF THE LANOPOLIS

Entering LANopolis for the first time can be a disorienting experience. The gaming center, which is sandwiched between a liquor store and a dentist office in a strip mall in a medium-sized Texas city, does not welcome the uninitiated with directions for participating in its arcade-like venue. The signs on the front door state simply, "PC Repair, Upgrades" and "XBOX 360 & PC Gaming." More telling are the interlocking tapestry of faded game posters that cover the large windows on either side of the front

door. Not only do these sun-bleached advertisements signal that this is a gaming establishment, but they also function as *ad hoc* blinds, keeping the sun and heat out of a room that requires limited illumination and a cool climate.

Inside, LANopolis' main room is a 1,000 square foot "L-shaped" open space with concrete floors, yellow walls (which are largely unadorned with pictures or artwork), and high ceilings with exposed ductwork and ceiling fans. The reason for the Spartan décor, and for the lack of illumination generally, is because the room privileges the one device that truly populates the space – video screens. Upon first entering the room late one evening, I was immediately stunned by the range of concurrent gaming activities and the amount of ambient light emanating from video screens throughout the room. The disparate gaming activities, coupled with the lack of signage or a greeter, does little to guide the uninitiated on where they should go, whom they should approach, or directions that might otherwise put them at ease.

It is even difficult for LANopolis' veterans to navigate through the throng of bodies during the center's peak hours: there are friends playing at the stand-up arcade games near the front door, patrons seated shoulder-to-shoulder at card tables supporting their own desktops and laptops[101], and on-lookers peering over the shoulders of gamers playing with the Xbox 360 and Wii against the room's back wall. Once I squeeze my way to LANopolis' main desk and cash register at the "elbow" (and thus center) of the "L-shaped" room, I encounter one of the center's few pieces of signage. It is a dry erase

[101] Patrons bring in their own computers during BYOC, or "bring your own computer," events to use their own hardware while taking advantage of the site's fast connectivity and social forum.

board that lists upcoming events, the prices of snacks and drinks (no outside food or beverages allowed), and fees for the various services. Along the room's longest wall are twenty high-end PCs (personal computers) loaded with a bevy of popular games across genres. This PC bank is one of the few features that cannot move, and it is the main hardwired attraction for many of LANopolis' clientele. Along the shorter walls are a pair of flat screen monitors, and a large video projector screen, each of which sport oversized beanbag chairs for gamers to lounge and nap on. LANopolis' general design and range of services match accounts of LAN cafés elsewhere (see, Beavis et al., 2005; Jansz and Martens, 2005; Beavis and Charles, 2007).

While the expensive equipment (e.g., PCs, high-definition LCD monitors) is tethered to the room's perimeter, the open floor plan can be easily reconfigured for the clientele's changing needs. For example, card tables and power strips are brought out for the all-night marathon sessions, and other events, such as tournaments and private parties, can easily be hosted at LANopolis. Such spatial malleability serves at least two needs. First, because LANopolis is not always running at peak hours, the company supplements its income by accommodating a variety of requests. According to the owner, Thomas Christopherson, a life-long video gamer himself, LAN centers *must* provide a diversity of services and maximize their space in order to remain financially viable. As if to confirm this business truism, LANopolis' closest competitor (located 20 miles to the North), went out of business during the writing of this chapter.

The second benefit to the space's multiplicity of uses is that it permits the players, especially during the all-night marathons, to make themselves comfortable in this

otherwise austere space. Moving small tables around, logging onto computers next to their friends, and watching movies and sports on the big screens while sprawled out on beanbag chairs encourage gamers to consume a wealth of media together and at their leisure. Such a dynamic and emergent room also complements the liminal nature of the gaming experience itself; the movement between worlds is mirrored in the gamers' transition between a host of mediated activities in a transformable room. Beavis and Charles (2007) draw a connection between the LAN café's physical space and the gamers' identity work, stating: "As 'real life' physical locations, LAN cafés provide sites where on- and off-line presence, identities and communities overlap and merge as players engage in online play and tournaments with seen and unseen others, and participate in the jointly constructed textual world of the game" (p. 693). LANopolis, like the game modes and control settings in video games, is customizable, and the space is thusly what the players make it – physically and socially.

The foregoing description of LANopolis mirrors similar reports about LAN cafés, but what about the site's physical connection to ludic war? As should be clear, there is no *necessary* connection between LANopolis' multipurpose spatial configuration and the activity of ludic war. Said differently, virtual warring is not some foregone consequence of playing video games in a LAN setting. Yet this is not the whole story either. Unlike other commercial businesses, LANopolis facilitates emergent play (i.e., social context) with and through a range of games, including shooters, providing the right conditions for ludic LAN wars to unfold. Ludic war is therefore a contingent social activity that is militarized through specific gameplay practices. Ludic LAN war is, therefore, an

amplified version of ludic war play where avid gamers have that either self-organized (in the case of home LANs) or have sought out a commercial setting for optimal mediated battles. It is to these games and its players that this chapter now turns.

LESSONS FROM THE VIRTUAL TRENCHES

The *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, *Medal of Honor*, and the *Counter-Strike* franchises are modern-era military shooters that may be played alone and offline, or with others online from remote locations, or together in LAN settings. These shooters are especially popular among the regular gamers at LANopolis. Players select game modes in these titles that set the objectives for that play session. Popular multiplayer game modes include "team deathmatch," where teams work to rack up more kills than the other; "capture-the-flag," where teams move an item from one location to another; and "tactical" or "hardcore" where players cannot re-spawn (are not allowed to play again) after they are killed, thereby dramatically increasing the challenge. Success in any of these team-based modes is predicated largely on adept hand-eye coordination, possessing more than a passing familiarity with the games and their maps, and quickly and effectively communicating with teammates. After playing alongside LANopolis' best players for many, many hours, I can relate some of the foremost lessons of playing ludic war at this LAN center. Intriguingly, only some of these "lessons" have to do with the games proper, as others are about communication and social comportment. I learned, what I am labeling here, *ludic collaboration*, *techno-ludic literacy*, and the *discourse of domination*. These observational headings are not *a priori* in nature, but have emerged out of my 70+ hours of playing popular shooters with and against others at this venue.

Ludic Collaboration

There is arguably no gameplay "lesson" more evident than the need to communicate with teammates when engaged in ludic war. One can opt to play solo missions in shooters (as was discussed in Chapters Two and Three) and there are plenty of single player game options available at LANopolis. However, this gaming center's overwhelming attraction (and others like it) are the high-end PCs that support the resource-demanding, multiplayer combat-oriented games. *Ludic collaboration* is defined here as the chatter and strategizing that occurs between gamers before, during, and after their virtual firefights. The overwhelming majority of my initial conversations with fellow gamers concerned matters immediately related to the combat tasks at hand.

During my first multiplayer battle in *Call of Duty 4*, I teamed up with a young man of a slight build who sported small round glasses and messy brown hair named Germ. Many players in LANopolis use their online handles, and Germ is no different.[102] After inviting me to join his team, Germ, who was seated immediately to my left along the long row of networked PCs, and without taking his eyes off his own screen, coached me through what equipment choices I ought to make to best complement his (now) four-man force. We were competing against a proficient two-person team, led by Lee (his gamer handle), a portly man in his early 20s. Lee, who is no stranger to LANopolis or *Call of Duty 4*, enjoys boasting of his virtual exploits to his dispatched enemies, his teammates, and anyone within earshot. During our pitched battles with Lee's

[102] My personal gamer moniker is Ludology, meaning "the study of games." No gamers have yet called me out on this "meta" nickname, but they also do not address me as Ludology. They all seem to prefer the shorter, "Lude," instead.

outnumbered but well-coordinated team, Germ would often lean over and point to various elements on my screen suggesting where I might hide, find good firing positions, and otherwise try to outmaneuver Lee and his teammate. I was surprised to find that knowing your opponent is almost as useful as being familiar with the game and its control system. Our team's on- and offline communications are in line with Manninen's (2003) observations concerning the diversity of peer-to-peer communications in a multiplayer setting. Throughout this and the following battles, we would often find ourselves celebrating our team play. Phrases like, "Dude, nice kill!" and "Thanks, you saved my ass!" are common exclamations during LANopolis' pitched battles.

Another notable example of ludic collaboration occurred when two teenage friends, Sam and Max, who were both deeply immersed in a combat game that they had never played before, tried to best an obstacle together.[103] Max was certain that he could move his character into a more advantageous spot on the map by using his rocket launcher as a propulsion device. Sam, who was not initially convinced of this seemingly suicidal scheme, scooted his chair to Max's computer so as to solve this riddle together. After a few minutes of experimenting, the earlier trials of which resulted in Max killing himself repeatedly, the pair successfully launched Max's avatar onto a narrow, hard-to-reach ledge. This success was celebrated with raised fists, and with Sam's shouting,

[103] I believe that the game they were playing was *Unreal Tournament 3*, a fantastic combat game that is both similar to and different from military-themed games. While there are important textual and generic differences, I believe that the shared, collaborative learning is not necessarily game- or genre-specific.

"F*ckin' sweet rocket jump!" Together, the two had explored the affordances of a weapon for something other than cyber-maiming.

Techno-Ludic Literacy

The second major lesson of playing virtual war is that having the right equipment, or knowing what equipment one ought to have, is perceived as a vital, if not sacred, knowledge. *Techno-ludic literacy* in the case of LAN gaming pertains to the specific strategies of collaborative gameplay as well as the PC hardware and technologies that run these games. Because you can equip yourself with increasingly better equipment, either by leveling up in *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield*, or through buying yourself more powerful arms in *Counter-Strike*, understanding what weapons are ideally suited for a map and game mode is a prized and respected knowledge. For example, there is an definite advantage to knowing: which maps are better for long-range weapons and those that are better for close-quarters weapons; when to use certain munitions and when to conserve them; and how to outflank and find cover in a variety of combat scenarios. These games demonstrate, round after round, that all warfighting technologies are not created equal, and that they afford different benefits in varying situations.

This is the reason why, on my first night in LANopolis, I was accused of being a "noob tube," or someone who improperly uses a grenade launcher. I had deployed it in an unconventional setting – namely, inside a narrow hallway. My tactical miscalculation was not labeled as a form of experimentation, like the Sam and Max example, but as a decision that called into question my knowledge of war gaming and my identity as a "proper" team player. Thus, in additional to drawing attention to my blunder, this public

labeling censures and marks the accused as one who either does not belong in that setting (virtual and/or physical), or is ignorant of unofficial (but no less operative) ludic war protocols. This latter point receives full attention in the chapter's final sub-section.

I was surprised to find that the attendees' collective preoccupation with understanding weapon technologies and team tactics extends beyond the virtual battlefields to the PC hardware that supports these wars. This interest is, at least in part, motivated by wanting to maximize one's pay-to-play investment at LANopolis. There are (at most) only two individuals, the owner and the manager, who field the various technical questions and requests. Knowing how to troubleshoot a PC, or navigate a complex setup screen is useful knowledge in a setting where help is not always immediately available.

Yet this shared interest in understanding high-end PC gadgets and celebrating the latest and "greatest" wares reflects a deeper cultural and class issues as well. Not unlike the military-themed games' basic play logics, this often unreflective adulation of newer and "better" consumer wares suggests that for every problem there is a technological solution – be it a better video card, or a smarter weapons system. At least some technical rationality exists, then, on both sides of the video screen: that is, both on the fictional battlefield (e.g., one should have the "right" weapon selected for the "right" scenario), and in the climate-controlled space of LANopolis (e.g., this hardware is "naturally" better for this particular game). The instrumentality that is endemic to ludic LAN war play is accompanied by the incessant drive to constantly outfit one's computer with additional gadgets, thereby weighing technological advances (and "progress") over critical

reflection about said upgrades or their related techno-social processes (e.g., planned obsolescence, technological rationality). This tendency is especially pronounced among PC gamers, since their computer rigs can be outfitted with newer and newer pieces of hardware. Console systems, on the other hand, are overwhelmingly "plug-and-play" technologies. Although it outside this chapter's focus, it bears underscoring that PC gaming is a particularly classed leisure pursuit.

A quick qualification about technological rationality is in order. Like the perhaps too simplistic ideology transfer in Luckham's "armament culture" concept, I am reluctant to fully embrace a totalizing technological rationality for fear that it might predetermine my future field notes, and that it may introduce an unduly deterministic concept into the analysis. Taking these caveats seriously, this analysis moves forward cautiously with a belief that techno-ludic literacy is a prized skill when military shooters are played in this particular, competitive techno-social configuration, and that this valued literacy too often privileges technological power for its own sake. I offer two examples of how technological rationality and war play go hand-in-hand. The first example comes from an interview with LANopolis' owner, and the second is from a conversation where a young gamer tries to impress his peers with his PC knowledge.

Thomas Christopherson has been LANopolis' owner-operator since the company opened its doors in June 2006. A broad-shouldered white man in his late 30s, Christopherson wanted to fill what he saw as his city's need for a full-time computer gaming center. Christopherson, who is believed to be overly gruff by some of the gamers, is a self-assured businessman who frequently looks for corporate alliances with PC

hardware and software companies. Scratching his small, dark goatee, he explains LANopolis' ability to survive when similar businesses have failed, stating directly: "I know what I'm doing. I know what's involved." Christopherson claims that LANopolis has just over 4,000 open accounts, with only a handful of duplicates, and that the all-night events typically attract 30-40 gamers – an estimate that agrees with my observations.

Christopherson believes that PC gaming is unique amongst gaming platforms, and that there is something inherently special about the technology that makes it more appealing to dedicated gamers. He states: "PC gaming is more complicated. There's more to do. PC games migrate to the consoles. They always have, they always will. If you're serious about gaming you play on a PC. You don't play on a Mac or a console."[104] This sentiment was echoed more forcefully by a gamer late one night when he mocked another gamer's computer saying, "Your computer sucks. Macs are gay!" For Christopherson, and for many of LANopolis' patrons, quality multiplayer gaming happens on PCs because the technology can support the most resource-demanding games, and thus, the "best" ludic LAN war experiences.

Christopherson sees PCs and PC gaming as quasi-therapeutic tools for working through anxieties and natural (though primarily male) desires to exact violence. The owner asks rhetorically: "But what do [war video] games do? They take the pain out of fighting." He pauses, then continues, "But what you can't do is take the fight out of

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[104] Christopherson blames the public relations beating that PCs have taken on journalists who he sees as ardent Mac devotees. "The Mac elite are also popular journalists. They love their Macs. It's a cult. That's why PCs are so disparaged. But they don't know what they're talking about. Gaming doesn't happen on Macs."

people. We've been doing it for far too long. It's going to come out somehow. At least this way it's safe." He points to the gamers playing behind him during our mid-afternoon interview, noting: "These guys play these games all the time, but we've *never once* had an act of violence [at LANopolis]. It just doesn't happen. If you're being annoying someone might tell you to shut-up, but that's it." Violent video gaming is a healthy, if not natural, pursuit for Christopherson. Surprisingly, the owner's intuitive beliefs mirror Jeffrey Goldstein's work on violent toy play. After mapping out the general approaches to the topic, Goldstein advocates that scholars ought to conduct more research in natural settings (e.g., like a LAN center) to test the variety of ways in which war toys are taken up. Goldstein (1995) notes:

> We can see that many needs may be satisfied in war play, most of them having little or nothing to do with aggression per se. Among them we have suggested curiosity; exploration; coping; anxiety and fear reduction; self regulation of cognitive, emotional, and psychological states; and social identity. All social play occurs simultaneously at different levels of explanation and activity (p. 141).

Moving off topic slightly, Christopherson opines about public officials' preoccupation with violent games: "You know, people like Tipper Gore and Hillary Clinton, they want to cut off our balls. What we need is less government regulation, not more. [Military and war video games are] an easy target. That's why the press and politicians attack violent video games and gamers." Not surprisingly, the gaming center's owner speaks forcefully about gaming critics and to a moral panic that threatens his business, livelihood, and lifelong leisure pursuit.

The second example of techno-ludic literacy occurred when I overheard Scott, a young teen with seemingly boundless energy, trying to impress his fellow gamers with

his knowledge of PC hardware and his family's affluence. Resting on his knees while propped up on a beanbag chair, Scott addressed his peers' backs as they all stared at their respective monitors while engaged in virtual combat. Scott did not allow this collective sign of disinterest dissuade him from his task at hand, and – with detail that I am unable to reiterate because of its technological specificity – Scott launched into an argumentative foray explaining exactly how he planned to "mod" (or modify) his family's home computer which was purportedly worth, "at least, $5,000." To no one in particular, Scott proposed an alternative plan that would allow him to transform an existing "Alienware" computer, a PC brand designed for high-performance gaming, for just under $10,000. His plans were met by polite if perfunctory "okays" and "yups" as the elder gamers did not pull themselves away from their screens. Scott was not deterred by their collective disinterest. Although, he might not have noticed this fact either, as he was lost in thought, preoccupied with counting out on his hands the various components he needed to build his ideal gaming rig. It is remarkable that Christopherson and Scott, among LANopolis' oldest and youngest players, each speak to the skill needed to fit into a social scene that values the instrumental knowledge needed to facilitate "proper" ludic wars.

Discourse of Domination

Playing video games in LANopolis also teaches players how to perform as players, and how to police and mark others when they deviate from presumed norms. The obvious demographic characteristic of the all-night gamers is that they are almost all white and male. And because LANopolis is such a markedly homo-social space, it plays host to tacit and explicit displays of braggadocio, machismo, sexism, racism, and

homophobia. In *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture* (2008), Derek Burrill examines the digital subjectivity of boyish masculinity that is cultivated across a variety of video game texts and gameplay interactions. I do not wish to pursue Burrill's approach because he focuses on subjectivity as it is re-inscribed across texts and spaces, not gamers' practices in a shared gamespace (his Chapter 3, for example, examines the theoretical aspects of arcade space but he does not engage gamers about their experiences). Moreover, I would do a disservice to my descriptive account, to say nothing of gender studies' theoretical insights, were I to attempt to rehearse the literature and shoehorn in its critical commitments at this late juncture. Fortunately, such focused analyses of masculinity in video games and game culture exist – see, the work of Derek Burrill (2008), Carly Kocurek (sparklebliss.com), and Tanner Higgin (tannerhiggin.com).

At no point in my fieldwork have I seen more than six women or girls in the space at any one time. One evening I did watch three women playing *World of Warcraft* (2004), a massively multiplayer online role-playing game, with one another. But like most women at LANopolis, they left well before midnight.[105] The paucity of women at LANopolis reflects similar accounts of other LAN sites. For example, Beavis and Charles (2007) state: "Within LAN cafés and LAN gaming, girl gamers stand out by virtue of their rarity and physical presence" (p. 693). Upon first entering LANopolis, women and girls are met with protracted male glances. Girls and women who do not play

[105] Perhaps the least scientific but nevertheless telling physical marker in LANopolis was the state of toilet in its single, unisex bathroom. At no point after midnight did I ever see it with the lid in the down position, and by the early morning hours some of the gamers did not even feel the need to shut the door.

generally spend their time watching their boyfriends play, or relaxing before one of the many screens and watching a movie or television program. More than once I found myself seated on the couch next to the only girls in LANopolis while taking periodic breaks from the frenetic team-based fighting. Tracy, a late-teen with long brown hair and a love of texting, and I both sighed audibly as the LCD monitor that we were watching was changed from TBS's running of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) to an input channel for another Xbox 360 setup. Tracy sighed because she lost her show. I sighed because it meant I had to return to the ludic warring. When asked about LANopolis' conspicuous lack of female gamers, Christopherson responded:

> Some women come in here, but not many. Often they're either girlfriends, or they're mothers dropping off their kids. They'll hang out and play the arcade games--*Dance, Dance, Revolution* or *Rock Band*--but no they're not playing *Call of Duty* or *Team Fortress* [another team-based, first-person shooter game]. That's combat, that's what the guys play. With women and gaming, they're into the more exclusively social games. They want to talk and trade and strategize. Yeah, they want to talk … they'll probably talk you to death. [Laughs to himself.]

Because women, girls, and gamers of color are so notably absent, certain social conventions are jettisoned to make room for a gendered, LAN-specific discourse that privileges domination to egalitarianism. LANopolis' gamers deal with infractions of gaming etiquette, as well as more general social violations, in ways that reveal the concerns that this gaming configuration values. The extent to which ludic war is or is not replicated in the exchanges I have witnessed is not entirely clear to me yet. However, it stands to reason that the quickly alternating defensive and offensive postures in war games, along with the gameplay hierarchies that are established after repeated battles, escape their virtual bounds and are articulated in the gamers' exchanges with one another.

Of course, when asked about it, the gamers say that they are "just playing," "being silly," or that they are simply "having a good time." The following description seeks to complicate this common refrain, arguing that the barbed LAN discourse communicates more than gamers purport, and that their exchanges are a means of policing one another's gameplay. There are at least three social violations that I have witnessed at LANopolis – playful, tolerable, and inviolable – which are categorized according to the response to the infraction, not the infraction proper.

Playful transgressions are virtual and real-world exchanges where gamers humorously irritate or provoke one another. These verbal and virtual sparring matches are understood to be joking by all parties, and are part of the experience of playing against one another generally (i.e., the equivalent of "trash talking"). For instance, during a warm-up round of *Counter-Strike*, Sam yelled "Knife Fight!" indicating that all the participating combatants were to only use their knives. The rest of the players quickly parroted the call. However, this self-imposed edict was quickly abandoned after Sam's opponent shot him with an assault rifle. Incredulously he yelled, "You shot me, bitch!" To which, Lee responded, "Well, don't bring a knife to a gun fight!" "But we're playing knife fight!," Sam pleaded. This exchange was met with collective laughter.

Another playful transgression is the mocking (or "flaming") of games that are not sufficiently masculine, or those deemed to be substandard. "Hard core" gamers – a label that many of LANopolis' regulars wear proudly – are known for deriding Nintendo games, which often cater to "casual gamers" (a marketing demographic) because of their accessibility and their typically lighter subject matter. One evening a young man began

playing *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (2008), a popular cartoonish fighting game for Nintendo's Wii system, against LANopolis' back wall. After a few moments he was the target of ribbing from nearby PC users who contend the game and its system is for "babies and sissies."

Tolerable transgressions are off-color conversations and banter that are generally not heard or sanctioned in public settings. The majority of these expressions are, on their face, little more than name-calling. Yet what makes these exchanges "tolerable" is that gamers are labeling each other as marginalized or presently absent groups. And because nearly all the players at the all-night gaming sessions identify as young, white, straight men, the verbal jabs are often racist, homophobic, and/or sexist. I will offer one example of each, in respective order.

When playing *Call of Duty 4* as the "Op-For" (the opposing force) whose avatars are depicted as Arab, Lee and his team often erupt in a celebratory Arabic Zalghouta chant (sounds like "Yalalalalalala!"), mimicking the impassioned cries of Middle Easterners often depicted in films and in news coverage. Obviously, this performance bears strikingly close resemblance to kids making stereotypical Native-American "hoots" in games of "Coyboys and Indians." A second example happens late into the night as the younger boys become self-conscious and hyperaware of the space's increasingly homo-social constitution. The younger gamers describe LANopolis as a "sausage porkfest," and warn one another not to fall asleep for fear of being "made gay" (i.e., sexually assaulted). One last troubling example is that the verb "rape" is often used to describe the complete domination of one player at the hands of another. As Lee was divvying up

the available players while spearheading an informal *Call of Duty 4* tournament, he quipped to a teammate, "I'm glad we're together. I don't like to rape my friends." As one who participates regularly in online games played from my home, I can confirm that this verbal threat is neither an isolated incident, nor is it restricted to LAN gaming.

The third category – *inviolable transgressions* – include expressions that are a direct affront to the in-group (the LAN gamers themselves), or violate sacrosanct play principles. Bobby, a black teen with shiny short dreadlocks, confronted an acquaintance when he overheard the latter boy say, "F*ck dat nigga!" Although this charged phrase was not directed at Bobby, he nevertheless interceded and asked the white boy, "What do you mean?" Realizing quickly what he had said, the white boy replied, "Nothing. Nevermind." To which Bobby said, "Alight, but watch it." Wanting to put the issue to rest, the white boy responded, "We're cool, we're cool."

Another sacrosanct rule is the prohibition against cheating, either by performing a software "hack," or by surreptitiously watching someone else screen (known as "screen peeking" or "screen hacking"), to gain an unfair play advantage. Periodically, shouts of "Hack!" and "Hacking!" spread in LANopolis, at which point gamers stationed at PCs turn around to see if anyone holds an unfair advantage over what is perceived to be private information. There is a similar unofficial ban on "griefing" or purposefully ruining the game for all involved by wildly deviating from the rules (e.g., purposefully getting killed, or killing one's teammates). In all likelihood, Lee called me a "noob tube" because he thought that I was purposefully trying to cause trouble when I fired my rocket-propelled grenade in a narrow hallway. Although I did not know what I was doing

at the time, I was shocked at how quickly I was called out for my online behavior in this offline space. I continue to be stunned by the behaviors that elicit pointed criticisms, and the manifold slurs that fly under the proverbial radar precisely because they are about people outside of LANopolis.

"FRIENDLY FIRE"

This chapter offers an ethnographic description of a social environment in a single, commercial gaming space. Clearly, the foregoing discussion is particular to LANopolis and is not generalizable to other venues or populations. One can easily imagine, and some have no doubt played at, arcade-like venues that differ considerably from LANopolis. It also bears repeating that there were and continue to be gaming opportunities besides the popular FPS games at my research site. Yet what makes the study of shooters in LANopolis so intriguing is the way in which the publicly performed ludic warring dominates the space – effectively marginalizing the other gaming experiences – during the all-night marathons, and substantially prefiguring how virtual combatants ought to play with one another. In LANopolis, ludic war commonly escapes its mediated bounds to find expression in this shared space, becoming an operative and regulatory force in the attendees' play lives. The games, the players, and the mode of technological connectivity and mediation (i.e., the LAN itself) coalesce at this gaming site to overdetermine a social milieu that is highly gendered, classed, and hetero-normative.

I conclude with a gamer's somewhat failed attempt at humor. As Lee returns to his PC with another energy drink in hand during one of the summer's all-night gaming

sessions, he tells a joke to the gamer sitting next to him. "You know," begins Lee, taking a conspicuously loud slurp from his tall beverage, "I like my C4 [an explosive device popular in many combat games], like I like my women…." He pauses for dramatic effect, but then blanks. He fumbles unsuccessfully for the punch line, evoking premature laughter from his small audience. "Wait, hold on," he protests, as he struggles to formulate the joke's conclusion, while wiping excess energy drink from his lip. "I know," he continues, "I like them in small, tight packages that are ready to blow." He then punctuates this belabored finale by using his hands to mimic a mushroom explosion with its accompanying sound. Donning a self-satisfied grin and his oversized earphones, Lee returns to his gaming menu and preps for the next firefight. This clumsy and off-color joke encapsulates many of my field findings to-date about the power of the three-way nexus of military games, technology, and a hard-core, male gaming community to engender a social space that operates under an unwritten but nevertheless understood code that polices play inside and outside of its virtual battlefields. The following chapter asks these same LAN gamers what they think makes one a good virtual soldier, what they do to improve their personal gameplay skills, and how ludic warring relates to their thoughts about worldly strife.

Chapter Six

The Promotion of Self in Everyday Strife: Gaming Capital of the Ludic Soldier

"Making war your bitch."
-- David, 23-year old LAN gamer on the pleasures of command and control in military shooters

INTRODUCTION

This chapter continues the work of the last by examining in detail what gamers think makes one a "good" ludic soldier across a range military shooters (in franchises like *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor*, *Battlefield*, *Counter-Strike*, etc.), as well as how they ascend in rank in their games *and* play groups. Based on interview data drawn from a focus group with seven of LANopolis' most avid gamers, and like the previous chapter's focus on contextual gaming practices – i.e., gameplay "lessons" – the current analysis is concerned with assessing players' diverse actions for constructing and maintaining their identities as "hardcore" gamers (as defined within their play community and in contrast to outsiders) when earning their gaming capital in a shared play space.[106]

This chapter's focus group[107] was held in the multi-purpose room of LANopolis – the one commonly referred to by patrons as "the *Rock Band* room" because it houses the menagerie of plastic equipment used in popular music games. The session lasted from 10:00 PM until midnight, ending before the beginning of that evening's adult "all-night"

[106] Please note: I am not interested in explaining the pleasures of identity formation vis-à-vis a traditional media psychology approach. For behavioral research on the pleasures of first-person perspective and gaming control from a media psychology perspective, see the works of Jeroen Jansz (2005, 2007) and Peter Vorderer et al. (2003, 2006), respectively.
[107] The focus group's discussion prompts are available in Appendix B.

LAN party (running from midnight on Saturday until noon on Sunday). The focus group participants are all male, and ranged in age from 22 to 51, with an average age of 28. These gamers are all regulars at LANopolis, and represent the business's core game-playing constituency.

This chapter's title gestures to its two major points of theoretical and methodological inspiration. The first is a tongue-in-cheek reference to Erving Goffman's seminal *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* wherein the famed sociologist argues for a dramaturgical view of symbolic interactionism. This approach to understanding micro-scale social interactions contends that people perform for one another like actors on a stage (e.g., choosing their props, costumes, etc.). Yet unlike most stage plays, individuals perform simultaneously as actors and audiences, and are therefore engaged in dialectical exchanges in which actions are constantly being accepted, discredited, or ignored. To look like a gamer, the participant must perform like a gamer, and this play performance must be recognized as such by one's peers.

This performance alone, however, is not enough to qualify one as "good" ludic soldier. Players must also generate and utilize "gaming capital," or the knowledge of virtual worlds, fan discourse, commercial culture, and social rules of play (Consalvo, 2007).[108] In the case of military shooters, gaming capital includes a knowledge of seminal franchises, the proper use of weapons and equipment, strategic understanding of battle maps, winning combat strategies for various game modes, an appreciation of gaming etiquette, accessing online resources, and knowing the underlying game

[108] Consalvo [2007] is in debt to Pierre Bourdieu's [1984] schemas of symbolic capital.

technologies, among other skills. The cultivation of gaming pleasures in the context of the LAN is predicated in large part on players' abilities to prove their play competencies – i.e., *not* to play as a "noob tube" – by leveraging their textual, paratextual, and contextual gaming knowledges for themselves and for their peers.

This chapter seeks to answer the following interrelated questions: first, what exactly is a "hardcore" gamer? Second, what competencies and practices makes one a "good" ludic soldier? And, finally, to what extent (if any) does the ludic soldier's gaming capital depend on knowledge of worldly combat? Examining what constitutes gaming capital for hardcore players and how they build their *bona fides* as legit gamer-soldiers in a LAN setting will disclose how ludic war's pleasures are integrally connected to the broader domain analyzed in the earlier chapters, notably the game text, the marketing environment, and the context of worldly warfare.

WHAT'S SO "HARD" ABOUT HARDCORE GAMING?

There exists in the minds of gamers and non-gamers alike the image of the hardcore gamer. It is not a flattering one. Using the screen capture below (Fig. 6.1) as our introductory guide to this stereotype, we can posit that the imagined hardcore gamer is obese. He is white. He is slovenly. He is straight, though one might hasten to add, usually single. He is, not incidentally, a he. And, according to *South Park*'s critically acclaimed episode on obsessive *World of Warcraft* players from which the image below was taken, the hardcore gamer "has absolutely no life."

Figure 6.1: The "hardcore" gamer in *South Park*'s "Make Love, Not Warcraft" (2006).[109]

The hardcore gamer is thus the antithesis to the casual gamer. In his book on casual gaming, Jesper Juul (2010) sets the gaming types against one another as follows:

> There is an identifiable *stereotype of a hardcore player* who has a preference for science fiction, zombies, and fantasy fictions, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games. The *stereotype of the casual player* is the inverted image of the hardcore player: this player has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit little time and few resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games. (emphasis in original, p. 8)

Game scholars Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig de Peuter strike a similar note, stating:

> The hard core is a demographic stratus well recognized in game marketing: young men who play intensively, have disposable income, adopt new hardware platforms early, buy as many as twenty-five games a year, are literate about games and conventions, read the game magazines, and forum opinions, through word of mouth or online, about games and machines. (2009, p. 80)

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[109] Image from: http://southparkstudios-intl.mtvnimages.com/shared/sps/images/shows/southpark/vertical_video/import/season_10/sp_1008_05_v6.jpg?width=480

I also used the *South Park* image (Fig. 6.1) as an icebreaker for my focus group. When I shared it with the informants, the screen capture evoked instant laughter, with all but the eldest participant recognizing its origins. The gamers agreed that the episode was obviously mocking those "hardcore" gamers who could not or would not moderate their obsessive gameplay (with a few adding that they know gamers like the one satirized).

Stereotypes or not, gamer identities do not emerge out of the ether – they are not Platonic ideals.[110] Rather, gaming experiences and player categories characterized as "hardcore" or "casual" (or points in-between) [111] emerge from specific design, marketing, and play practices. It is useful to ask, what sets of interlocking practices (borne out of the aforementioned design, marketing, and play choices) put the "hard" in hardcore gaming? Colloquially speaking, we might say that hardcore players are "fans" of video games. Yet I have avoided invoking this specific term and issues of fandom thus far because

[110] See, Boyer (2009) for an extended analysis of the casual-hardcore divide.

[111] Curiously, the group referenced a segment of gamers between the "hardcore" and "casual" categories that has seemingly escaped the critical literature. They call this moderate group "core gamers"; or, simply "the core." This is a catchall for those players who are conversant generally with video games, but who do not self-identify as either casual players or heavy users. According to "Doyle," a short, 23-year old, who plays regularly with "David" and "Kevin" at LANopolis (and who have been playing video games together since middle school), there are three major player categories.[111] Doyle enumerated these groupings: "'Casual gamers' are those who play on a whim. 'Core gamers' are guys who play games regularly. And 'hardcore gamers' are those who have dedicated themselves to a single game, a few games, or a particular genre." The six other gamers at the tabled nodded in agreement with this typology, and concurred that they would see one another around the table as prototypical hardcore gamers.

hardcore or power gamers[112], as they are sometimes called, are not necessarily synonymous with video game "fans."

As popular a subject as any in media studies, fans and fandom are *generally* understood within the critical literature to refer to media consumers and audiences that evidence some productive output. Yes, *all* media audiences are active (at some basic psychological level), and all media audiences *produce* meanings and interpretations (Fiske, 1992). However, fans invest their time, energy, and emotions (Sandvoss, 2005) into the creation of some novel, textual artifact, including modifying or "poaching" existing texts (Jenkins, 1992), constructing their own unofficial advertising paratexts (Gray, 2010a), participating in fan communities (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998), and by embodying their adoration through impersonation or "cos-play" (Hills, 2002).

My intent in citing but a modest sampling of this subject area's major works is to distance myself from it for this discussion of hardcore gameplay. I do not wish to argue that hardcore gamers cannot be fans, only that they *need not* be fans. Military shooter gamers often, quite purposefully, do not self-identify as "fans." Or, as Rooster opined: "I'm not a 'fan' of the term 'fan.'" LANopolis' hardcore gamers draw fine lines of distinction between their gameplay style and that of others, thus a vague term like "fan" is thought to be fairly meaningless by these players.

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[112] Interestingly, the "hardcore" label is usually applied to masculine game genres, while "power gamers" often describes dedicated MMO players (who are assumed to be more social and female). With the exception of Kevin, the gamers in the LANopolis focus group did not prefer the term "power" (or "grinders") to describe themselves, but they did not think it necessarily pejorative either.

Justifying his own gameplay practices, the 23-year old and currently unemployed David noted colorfully: "There is a certain enjoyment of getting *really* good at a game – at beating the snot out of it." David is referring specifically to perfecting one's gameplay actions within the virtual world. He is not referring to all the disparate acts of creativity typically associated fandom, such as modding, writing fan fiction, or performing cos-play. Game scholar Hanna Wirman (2007) argues rightly that it is not useful to understand all instances of "productivity" in games as being commensurate with fan productivity. As an alternative, Wirman suggests the following categories to parse out types of fan productivity in games: (1) *textual productivity*: play acts and game choices; (2) *instrumental productivity*: creating a text or item that assist self/others with gameplay; (3) and *expressive productivity*: creating a text or item that speaks to game culture (that need not have any in-game utility). This is not the mere analytic splitting of hairs. Striking this medium-sensitive distinction makes it clear that consumptive and productive practices do not convey from one entertainment medium to another without slippage, making medium-specific reassessments of dedicated users' actions necessary. If modality changes across entertainment mediums, it stands to reason that activity and productivity likewise change.[113]

It stands to reason that the more "co-creative" or "textually productive" one is in a virtual realm, the more gaming capital that player stands to acquire. Virtual soldiering in

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[113] Gamers in multiplayer settings have also been called "co-creative" (Morris, 2003; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006) agents because their acts contribute to the co-creation of unique gaming experiences; for example, a massively multiplayer role-playing game is a palpably different experience when the server is full than when it is not.

LANopolis is, by and large, expressed as a deep engagement with the games and, less frequently, as instrumental productivity (e.g., level creation, additional game mods). Curiously little game productivity that might read as traditionally fan-ish behavior (i.e., "expressive productivity") occurs in this play space because of its thoroughgoing emphasis on gameplay[114], the feminized gendering of fandom[115], and because shooter games do not typically enjoy robust and complex in-game economies that allow gamers to create and trade items. The latter difference partly explains why scholars interested in updating and applying Bourdieu's schemas of capital to gaming have clustered around role-playing titles, especially persistent massively multiplayer worlds like *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*, and virtual worlds like *Second Life* where gamers can craft their own digital commodities (Castronova, 2005; Malaby, 2006; Williams et al., 2006). These conspicuous objects of labor add value to the player's online profile and are clear embodiments of market capital. But as Thomas Malaby (2006) observes, there are whole "economies of practices" in games that are not articulated as user-created content but that still constitute a type of capital. Malaby states:

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[114] Because gamers pay-to-play in LANopolis, they usually focus on gaming and not on creating expressive or instrumental fan production.

[115] Although these particular players do not shy away from labeling themselves "hardcore" or "avid," they overwhelmingly detest the so-called "fanboy." In their minds, the fanboy differs from the average fan insofar as the former is perceived as being too close to the media object, and as guarding the property with an unhealthy, quasi-religious fanaticism. The fanboy is simply, for Doyle, "someone you just don't want to deal with." Wirman (2007) observes that, "While fandom has been seen as a feminized identity in the Western societies, power and hardcore gaming is usually related to rather masculine issues such as high technical competence, competition and 'hard work'" (p. 382). This is certainly the case for this group of players who see fanboys (and presumably fangirls) in a negative light. Being unable to moderate one's affective state or "mothering" a media object too much has uncomfortable gendered connotations for LANopolis' gamers.

> Cultural capital is the realization of what a given cultural group finds to be meaningful or important in bodies, objects, and offices. It includes those competencies and credentials that individuals or groups acquire over time within a particular historical context and also the objects that become valuable through their association with such meaning. It has three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1986). (2006, p. 155)

I am interested in examining the *less conspicuous acts* of dedicated gamers – those embodied competencies that enable LANopolis' patrons to call themselves and their comrades "hardcore" – because there is a clear investment in proving one's status as a competent gamer, *not* as competent fan.[116] Or, as Wirman observes, "Power gamers tend to find themselves more like professional players than hobbyist game fans" (2007, p. 382). What then, borrowing Wirman's terminology, are the textually productive gameplay acts that take precedence in this space and allow hardcore gamers to be identified and to self-identify as such? Gaming capital is a useful concept for thinking about how a constellation of gaming practices around a set of similar games that are played in a common space contribute to the construction of a unique gaming identity – in this case, that of the ludic soldier.

"GETTING HARD": FIGHTING FOR GAMING CAPITAL

What does it mean to be a "good" ludic soldier? And what do avid gamers do to promote themselves in their multiplayer sessions? We are not just talking about gaming

[116] One could extend Malaby's analysis of shooters to include Bourdieu's other two sub-categories of cultural capital by looking, for example, at how Major League Gaming sponsors elite players conferring on them "institutionalized credentials"; or, the cultural capital that accrued to the amateur design team behind *Counter-Strike*, originally a fan-authored level modification, after Valve Corporation game studio purchased their work, making it an officially sanctioned "objectified artifact").

capital generally, but are concerned with those conspicuously displayed skills and competencies that are meaningful for gamers of military shooters. Sarah Thornton (1995) coins the term "subcultural capital" for discussing the value placed on "hipness" for dance cultures. Thornton's term is conceptually relevant because it resembles gaming culture in several respects: the groups share similar demographics (teens and young adults); the subcultural capital of both are borne out of middle-class leisure pursuits; and media plays a constitutive role for each group. This final point is especially key. Thornton states:

> For, within the economy of subcultural capital, the media are not simply another symbolic good or marker of distinction (which is the way Bourdieu describes films and newspapers *vis-à-vis* cultural capital), but a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge. In other words, the difference being *in* or *out* of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure. (1995, pp. 13-14)

In the case of video game culture, or the LAN/shooter subculture (if we adopt Thornton's terminology), the games are the centerpieces for the creation, maintenance, and circulation of gaming capital because they attract gamers to gameplay and are the communicative means by which gameplay becomes meaningful. The implication is that games are not just an expressive medium *qua* games (as I have argued in previous chapters), but games are an expressive medium *qua* gameplay (practice), *qua* their gaming capital (aggregate practices).[117]

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[117] Studies by Heather Mello (2006) and Christopher Walsh and Thomas Apperley (2009) have been useful guides for this chapter's operationalizing of gaming capital as focus group prompts, and for thinking about whether the embodied competencies and cultural capital expressed and earned in a play space might contribute to human or social capital outside the LAN's virtual battlefields.

Although cultural capital's immediate value is context dependent, it does not necessarily follow that the knowledge and skills exercised in that setting also do not then convey in other parts of a person's life (although tracking and assessing that extra-gamic capital is outside this project's concerns).[118] To the first point about its context dependence:

> Cultural capital is distinctive for its specificity to a context of meaning and practice, such as existing ones associated with nation, class, region, or sources of social separation, and thus its acquisition is not amenable to immediate and isolated transactions. Instead, cultural capital is acquired through the culturally embedded practices of learning, in the informal sense, and authorization, in the official sense. Such exchange generates a feeling of belonging, of identification with a cultural group. (Malaby, 2006, p. 155)

And as Mello (2006) observes in her study of fantasy role-playing gamers, in addition to the sense of community that collaborative play engenders, there is learning – what literacy and education scholar James Paul Gee (2003) calls "situated cognition" – that transpires that may be useful outside of that original site of social interaction. The remainder of this chapter explores what these gamers think shooters tell them about war, what the games ignore, and what varying gameplay styles reveal about this community.

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[118] For example, Joseph Straubhaar, Viviana Rojas, and colleagues examine how minority and working class groups in Austin, Texas use techno-capital. Like other researchers focusing on technology practices, they extend Bourdieu's forms of capital. The authors state: "'Techno-capital/competencies' as a product of techno-dispositions, provides certain resources to interact and negotiate within the techno-field. As a structured space, the technofield will be analyzed as an arena where the human agency is enacted and negotiated in relation to all other social forces (political, economic, social, cultural, and so forth). The logic of techno-field is contingent upon the interaction between techno-competencies/capital and other forms of social forces" (Rojas et al., n.d., p. 10).

The Pleasurable "Lessons" of Ludic War (Textual Modality)

Juul (2010) observes that traditionally hardcore titles and genres – like the first-person shooters examined in the previous chapters – demand much of would-be players. Indeed, in privileging a certain inflexibility of design, the textual difficulty alienates those players who are either unwilling or unable to dedicate the time and energy needed to achieve textual mastery. The typical hardcore game likewise assumes that players come to it with an extensive knowledge of gaming culture and aesthetics (e.g., a familiarity with dominant narrative concerns, control conventions, etc.), and a willingness to invest the many, many hours needed to conquer its computational logic (see, Juul, 2010, Chapter 2). Hardcore players, in other words, are purposefully seeking out titles that will capture their attention for days, weeks, months, even years.[119] Indeed, LANopolis' gamers expressed a strong desire to master the textual machinery of their games, but they also want to learn from them.

The informants' desire to learn from military shooters is tempered by their belief that these lessons – *especially* as they concern warfare – are almost certainly limited in scope. Most of their war "education" (and more than one gamer used "air quotes" to describe the learning that takes place in these games) concerns the basic war instruments and field tactics. David remarked: "When I've learned about [new weapons, and new technologies], like customizing a firearm, things like that. I didn't learn about it so much from reading. I learned from playing these games.…This is [also the case for] old, WWII

[119] Interestingly, Juul observes that hardcore gamers and casual games are flexible with respect to available time and design; whereas casual gamers and hardcore games are less forgiving in terms of the their time demands and ease of use (2010, Chapter 2).

games. I know what a 'grease gun' is because I've played [WWII shooter games]." Flashing a knowing smile, Rooster chimed in similarly: "Hell, if I hadn't been playing *Counter-Strike* for over a decade, and you were to ask me – "What is a Colt M4A1 carbine?" – I'd probably tell you that it's a kind of Mustang!" This exchange precipitated an intense moment of crosstalk where the participants rifled off their own pieces of historical tidbits concerning current and historical equipment, and various nations' Special Forces units.

These gamers also readily acknowledge that military gameplay's lessons are only partly about weapons and historical groups. For these hardcore gamers, gameplay is equally about learning about the functioning of the computational systems that mediate those battles. Kevin, 23, the soft-spoken childhood friend of Doyle and David, noted: "I like that moment when I 'get' the game [referring to experiential flow of gameplay]… after that, I find the 'blind-spots,' the places on the map where people just don't know that they're going to be attacked." This comment excited Doyle, who then launched into an extended critique of *Modern Warfare*'s small multiplayer maps that privilege "quick twitch" reflexes and software exploits over time-tested combat strategy. Such games are, in his view, neither fun nor realistic. Doyle proclaimed: "I like a game if, where you die, and you can see [the reason]…You learn *those* lessons. And it's not about having twitch reflexes. And it's not about knowing the map. It's about having this rudimentary knowledge about how things work [in war]…" Later in the conversation, Buddy, 22, piggybacked on Doyle's point, noting that well-made games should teach you whether you can – at any one moment – commit to a battle, select another approach, or wait for

backup. Buddy is skeptical, however, that military shooters – even tactical titles like the Tom Clancy-brand shooters – can relay complex military lessons. He enumerated the following field tactics that most military shooters' underscore:

> Flanking an enemy is always going to take them by surprise. Suppressing fire is going to keep someone occupied, while someone else outflanks them. High ground is always preferable to being at the bottom of the hill. Those are the very, very basic [tactics]. If I'm a sniper, I want to be up high where I can see everything. A machinegun in cover is better than one out in the middle of a field. But that's keeping it really basic.

Buddy emphasized that these gameplay practices are standard in military shooters, but they are not exclusive to them. One can find similar strategies in any number of action-adventure and role-playing games.

Basic as they may be, there is nevertheless an undeniable pleasure that is bound up in the process of enacting these field tactics because they forge a affective connection between one's identity as a hardcore gamer, and as one's virtual identity as a ludic solider. The emergent linkage between gameplay, tactical knowledge, and martial identity is evident in the stories that the gamer tell one another around LANopolis' backroom table. Pointing to his friends Kevin and David beside him, Doyle reminisced:

> We actually have war stories. Like, I can literally go into the story as if we were in Vietnam…We've had times where we'd secure an area, and we'd "go hunting." And that's what we call it: "hunting." I'd say, we know that there are two guys in the area – "hunt them down!" And then we'd herd them into areas and shoot them down.

The gaming capital that shooter players enjoy is necessarily bound up in the ability to assess the situation at hand and coordinate plans with others to act, in other words, as a

grizzled (if virtual) field general. I will return to this point shortly, but I want to conclude this section with the second half of Doyle's story. He continued:

> [David and Kevin] hear me yell at them because I go into a different mode. I literally go into "squad commander." One time I shot one of them in the back of the head when he wandered off and wasn't following orders...In these games, it's not just playing the game, it's not fighting everybody. [You know] shooting guys. That's not the excitement. The excitement is taking a chaotic situation like [war] and putting an order to it that I command. Going into a situation where we might be losing, and then all of a sudden though a series of orders and through my own actions…I've just had a plan perfectly implemented to wipe out an area and seize it as my own.

David punctuated his friend's story, stating emphatically: "Making war your bitch."

David's off-color turn of phrase illustrates the premium that hardcore gamers place on to the ability to control the textual and technological contours of their virtual experiences. The focus group participants remarked more than once about the connection between their support for a hardcore title and the felt sense that game producers were implementing their collective design suggestions, especially as it pertains to issues of customizability. For example, David, stated: "When [game design] allows for full customization – and I'm not talking about perks sh*t or load-outs (referring to in-game weapon selection) – but about *your settings* … basically, I'm talking about the complete ability to tool your experience to how you see fit. Those are the games that are going to [succeed]." Sitting across the table, Buddy echoed David's point:

> It doesn't matter what game style you like … When you find one game that you *really* like, and then the sequel comes out and it's even better … and the third one comes out and you're like, "Holy f**king sh*t!" You can *tell* that [the game producers] took the advice [of gamers] … And when they take the time going into the second or third game, hearing what was said about it and making it into everything you thought it could be…. [It's great] that they really, really kept in tune with the players. They really listened to [us].

The *Modern Warfare* and Clancy-brand games franchises examined in Chapters Two and Three, respectfully, are two such franchises that have been designed primarily for hardcore audiences like those in LANopolis' focus group. One of the affective "lessons" that military shooters communicate stress to their hardcore game buyers is that their virtual wars are designed "for us, by us."

The Pleasurable Omissions & Conflations of Ludic War (Contextual Modality)

If LANopolis' hardcore gamers are suspicious of shooters' ability to teach anything more than basic field tactics, then they are categorically dismissive of their ability to convey the emotional and mental toll of real warfare. And they are thankful for this fact. On the one hand, the "good" ludic soldier identity hinges on the gamer's ability to demonstrate core competencies on the battlefield (to perform like a proper ludic soldier), which includes a working knowledge of the game's items and play strategies (i.e., modality of gaming text). But the ludic identity is, on the other hand and perhaps especially for this play group, predicated on the gamer's ability to articulate complex distinctions about how warfare gains its simulational representation (i.e., modality as relating to reality). Keep in mind that modality is a complex and contradictory set of claims about the world – including the necessarily incomplete simulation of a world at war. The participants simultaneously recognize their own incommensurability of desires – between wanting a game to be more "real" (in terms of physics, for instance), and wanting it to sidestep or elide war's nastiest, existential horrors for the purposes of pleasurable gameplay. A critical line of separation, then, between the hardcore gamer

and the "fanboy," according to these gamers, is the presence of a critical perspective that one applies to adored media texts.

During our discussion, LANopolis' players questioned their favorite games' representation war's innumerable horrors. Speaking to war's horrors, David, noted: "I don't want [military shooters] to be too realistic. Then it's intense for the wrong reasons." He elaborated on this point:

> Video games will always romanticize violence. Always. I don't think playing [shooters] is really like being in war. That's total horses**t. It's like, "that [game] was really competitive and good." It's not so competitive in war. [War is] like, "please God let me live to see another day." And then, the day after that. And the day after that. There is [pauses for effect] *considerably* less pleasure [in war].

Doyle seconded his friend's point stating: "Unless it's scripted, you'll never see a guy lose a limb and live. If the guy looses a limb, he's probably dead…[In a shooter] you either come back perfectly fine, or you're dead. Those are the two polar opposites that you can live with." David then replied, "Two [first-person shooter] archetypes: living or dead." To which Doyle responded: "Right. Death is grizzly. But surviving death and missing something from it, is worse…To have a player come back and be missing something – an arm, no legs – that is more grizzly for people to see. That is something [game developers] avoid."

These players are clearly aware of game producers' constraints and pressures as they relate to the commodification of war (including the issues explored earlier in Chapter Four). O'Brien, a short 28-year old man with a thin beard and a penchant for understatement, noted, "Throwing in all the actual atrocities of war into a game just isn't fun." Rooster seconded this point, saying: "There's a fine line that all these companies

that produce these games have to walk. …There's a limit, but you have to still sell the product to the masses." To which O'Brien responded: "Well, preying on people's fears and what's relevant is a good marketing tool."

O'Brien is correct. Hardcore game marketing largely hails those players seeking competitive gaming experiences and emotionally difficult environments – what Juul (2010) calls a negative "fiction preference." These negative fictional preferences include violent, frightening, or competitive gameplay elements (e.g., the "sci-fi genre" and "zombies" that Juul alludes to). As was argued in Chapter Four, shooter ads do not – as a rule – hail a casual game playing audience. [120]

This carefully targeted advertising strategy is not lost on LANopolis' gamers. Rooster, 29, a long-time *Counter-Strike* tournament player and part-time LANopolis employee stated:

> As game companies, they obviously have to [create their titles] in a way that appeals to Americans, and depicts us as the victor, the silent hero, the underdog, whatever the situation is, there's that mystique. And that's what they sell. I don't care if it's real or not. I just care about the enjoyment. There's always going to be those who are offended by everything, especially the cutting-edge military [games]. But that's also how [the companies] sell it.…Who doesn't want to imagine themselves as a part of a battalion fighting back invaders?

In addition to promoting the software's fictional content to avid male players, hardcore game marketing often celebrates the hardware technologies required to run the most resource demanding titles (reflecting the "techno-ludic literacy" lesson discussed

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[120] An exception to this marketing truism is a broadcast TV spot for *Modern Warfare: Black Ops* (2011) – titled, not insignificantly, "There's a soldier in all of us" – that shows a diverse group of people playing a live-action shooter game. See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pblj3JHF-Jo

last chapter). Take for example the print advertisement below (Fig. 6.2) that appeared in the March 2009 issue of *Wired* magazine. The ad's schema-like design reveals that the gaming laptop's technical innards are not hardware components, but are made up instead by the iconic elements from action-adventure and war games. The laptop is powered, among other things, by a tank, robot, crossbow, brass knuckles, and a bloodied chainsaw.

Figure 6.2: A revealing print ad of the connection between technology and war play appearing in the March 2009 issue of *Wired* magazine

David's earlier conversational thread about war's horrors led to a telling exchange that revealed the group's negotiation of game technologies and gameplay's two modalities covered in Chapter One – the linkage between an immersive narrative's

conveyance (game as mode of transport), and its articulation of a world at war (the game's connection to a shared reality). David was reminded of uncomfortable feelings generated by a mission in the single-player campaign of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010). He described a level where the player creeps through underground Vietcong tunnels armed with a handgun and flashlight. The level is dark and claustrophobic, and features enemy soldiers who leap from the dark armed with guns and knives. It is a haunting level; one that the group agrees is not "fun." David stated:

> The thing that *Black Ops* did was it took all the violence and made it grizzly to the point where, well not *really* realistic … [he is interrupted by crosstalk from others about the game engine's ability to render high resolution graphics]… [David presses on] *But you can still* throw a grenade in a pit and blow a guy's arm and leg off and he's still there alive, rolling on the ground. And that's a lot more disturbing, dark [content]. It's not necessarily 'bad,' but … [trails off in thought].

The crosstalk that slightly derailed David's point illuminates the group's simultaneous engagement of the game technology that powers the game alongside its representations.

Jumping somewhat to *Call of Duty*'s defense, but also post-9/11 military shooters generally, Doyle argued that these games can – despite their technological and design limitations – nevertheless convey a sense of existential horror and embodied history. Referring the to the Vietcong "tunnel run," Doyle reminded the group that: "Guys had to go down there with a pistol and a flashlight, and pray to God that there wasn't going to be a guy around the next corner with a knife. And that was something people had to deal with. And, sure, [game developers] can't replicate it perfectly, but that's part of the realism. The trick is [developers] have to find that line." Later, Doyle argued that even if these games fail to replicate the visceral anxiety of hand-to-hand combat, they might

better simulate the perspectival and affective remove of postmodern warfighting technologies. He reflected:

> You learn certain things about perceptions of [those in] the military…When you're doing that AC-130 scene [a well-known level in *Modern Warfare*] – it's cool, blowing up sh*t with a 150mm, 100mm, and a 50mm chain gun. But if you pay attention, you notice, [the computer controlled AI] don't give a shit. They're like: "Shoot that guy." Bang! "Shoot that guy." Bang!…They don't care because they're in a plane a couple miles up … [The game producers] are making a statement. [They are saying] "That's what [war] is like now." There are no guys in the field screaming, "Oh my God! We're on fire!"…Now there are Predator drone [pilots] in California bombing guys in another country. You have guys who are two miles up, blowing up things casually because it's just not an issue for them."

Thus, one's gaming capital depends on knowledge of shooters and a willingness to forge critical distinctions between modalities of gameplay – between ludic war's textual and contextual interfacing. These competencies and practices are however, as the next section attests, less important for these gamers than playing with others in good faith.

From "Griefing" to Support: Play Styles of the Ludic Soldier

There are diverging play styles that elicit vociferous responses from the focus group participants. These hardcore players complain about having to "babysit" novice players (i.e., "noobs"); coping with players who are feigning idiocy to engender everything from humor to ill-will (i.e., "trolls"); coping with teammates and opponents who cannot deal with losing (i.e., "rage quitters"); and having to game with those who wait at key map points to take advantage of unsuspecting players (i.e., "campers"). Still, none of these play styles are as irksome for LANopolis' convened discussants than "griefers." A "griefer" is one who deliberately harasses and provokes other players, and

does little else. In shooter games they might destroy their team's vehicles, kill teammates on purpose, or allow themselves to be easily killed by the enemy force, thus inflating that team's score (a despised practice known as "feeding"). Rooster sees griefing as a severe and, ultimately, unacceptable form of trolling, and says of it: "[Griefing] is not tolerated. You know, you can call me a bitch, a snitch, a whatever. But I'm going to report your ass [to the server administrator or online game service] because you're making my game experience and others un-enjoyable." David agreed with Rooster's distinction, stating, "Griefing is unforgivable as opposed to light trolling."

There is a persistently blurry line between failing to exercise situational awareness in the gamespace – i.e., playing as a "noob" – and purposefully performing like a novice. (This, again, was what I was accused of during my first foray into LANopolis). Fox, the silver mustachioed 51-year old, and one of the gaming center's oldest players, offered this note about novice war play:

> My excruciating pet peeve is when you're in the main tank [in *Battlefield Bad Company 2*], and you switch to the machine gun, and some jackass jumps in and rips [the tank] out there [into battle]. [That player] doesn't understand Guderian,[121] or any other [war] theory. And so he goes through all the infantry way far too far, and gets blown up in ten seconds.

To which, Rooster quick added: "Which usually results in Fox screaming some type of invective at the monitor for about a minute." The gaming center's elder readily conceded this addendum, clarifying only that he generally yells, "F*cking idiots!" Fox's anecdote syncs up with my general observations around the shared antipathy towards "noobs," "griefers," and cheating discussed in the last chapter. Despite its inherent difficulties,

[121] Heinz Guderian was a WWII German general and armored warfare theorist.

LANopolis' gamers believe that experienced players should be able to differentiate new players from those who are, in David's words, "just dicking around."

Griefing is anathema to cultivating good will in multiplayer game spaces, including LANopolis' ludic battlescapes. Cooperative play is, instead, the gameplay style that these patrons value most, and it is the clearest route to earning and maintaining one's gaming capital. According to the focus group participants, they prefer reliable teammates to those who might be better players but poorer communicators. This suggests that for LANopolis' hardcore gamers, their gameplay (i.e., their textual productivity) is not a strictly instrumentalist endeavor since they would rather grow social bonds and interpersonal connections than be guaranteed wins round after round. The group's gamers look for at least three elements in others that indicate a sense of personal investment: communication skills, an ability to discriminate among other gamers and their play styles, and a willingness to support teammates.

As I noted in Chapter Five's participant observations, "ludic collaboration" and keeping clear lines of communication are of paramount importance for virtual combatants. But critical as it is for coordinating virtual attacks, these attributes are not exclusive to first- or third-person shooters, or even combat-oriented games. Doyle voiced what he looks for in others in these terms: "If I could put it in one simple phrase: "Give a sh*t.…Give a sh*t about what you're doing." He continued, stating: "Doing fan fiction, making mods, that's kind of like an unrelated thing that you enjoy about the game." This is yet another sign that these hardcore gamers privilege in-game skills to other

expressions of game-oriented productivity. David offered his own definition of the cooperative or support gamer, saying:

> A support gamer can go into any category – they can be casual, they can be hardcore, power gamer – but it's the kind of person who plays a game with a headset, and doesn't use it to blare music, or mouth-off, or swear constantly throughout the game…Someone who really actually works together and tries to find other gamers who have that respect and actually have good enough communication skills to work together as a cohesive unit.

Buddy punctuated this point, saying: "It's all about communication…[It's like] hey, there's a sniper over there I need you guys to run around there, throw a grenade in, and f*ck his sh*t up."

Encouraging skillful communication during these battles is not only a means to an end – i.e., players facilitating situational awareness for one another – rather, thoughtful player-to-player communication is perceived as a necessary component for displaying compassion for others and for growing one's own capital as a good teammate. Doyle stated: "You've got to have that empathy as if you are there. Because you are wasting everyone's else time if you are focused on being goofy." And later: "[Video gaming] is like any other sport…You want everybody to be 'in' the game…It may be 'just a game,' but people want to actually play in the game. Not, play in the game and have [some guy] do whatever he wants."

Logging innumerable hours of gameplay enables players to make increasingly fine discriminations between their preferred play style and that of others. According to Fox, "Real players will start to discriminate and try to classify themselves [from other gamers]." His early "tank" anecdote illustrates that in an environment where

communication cues are not always clear (e.g., not all players have headsets, there are gameplay accidents and misunderstandings, there are varying levels of competencies and knowledge concerning best practices and strategies) hardcore gamers can, over time, read others' play styles and make choices to group-up accordingly. O'Brien enjoys discovering players of a similar caliber online, or meeting them in LANopolis for the first time. The game gives them a set of shared experiences that becomes the foundation for their relationship. But for veteran shooter players like Fox and Rooster, who are more interested in the game proper than making friends, discrimination is the key reading strategy for not being hamstrung by teammates and for insulating one's own gameplay pleasures and productivity from, as Rooster noted, "all the trash."

The ability to discriminate between play styles and communicate fluidly with teammates are key traits that hardcore gamers cultivate in themselves and seek out in others. Yet these characteristics are not as prized as those rare players who raise the performance of others. Buddy summarized his feelings on this point: "I think what makes you a good player, is to take that little dipsh*t that's on your team and to pull out a victory." Fox, who is more taciturn than his effusive, younger squad mates said this about his own performance as a "good" virtual soldier in his favorite shooter, *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*:

> [It's fun] when you find something that you can exploit…or that you can use to dominate the field, to bring success to the team – that's a good experience … [For example, in *Battlefield*] you can use the [tank's] machine gun to dominate two or three of the four flags. You know, and just rack up the kills, but also annihilate… the [other players'] strategy. You're above average as a player, so that other average players [on your team] can come through and play and succeed … [participant crosstalk]… [If you're playing well,] two or three players who would

> outrank you now have to team-up…and come across the map to get to you, to try and overcome the apparent advantage of the team.

Selfless gameplay is perceived to be a rarity in competitive games. And perhaps this is especially the case in military shooters where the objective is to rack up more kills than your opponents. Even if a title's game modes are not strictly zero-sum scenarios, many players act as if they are. Rooter reflected about the dearth of selfless players, saying:

> It's a really rare breed [of gamer], I wish there were more of them…The people that derive their enjoyment of the game not from their killstreak [their number of consecutive kills], not from how awesome they did, but they know…at the end of the match, when their team won, they know that they were badass. They say: "I kept this guy alive. I did this, I did that. [Sure,] my KDR[122] is in the pits, but my team won and I helped out." Those kind of people...that don't want to go for the gold and are totally happy to be in the background and help everybody else, those kind of players, I wish there were more of them.

Rooster's extended response clearly struck a chord with the other gamers seated around the table, with a few of his peers saying, "amen."

CONCLUSION: "CONSOLIDATE THE COMMUNITY"

For LANopolis' dedicated gamers, the pleasures connected to the promotion of self and the cultivation of one's own gaming capital is inextricably tied to the promotion of like-minded gamers. Skillful on- and offline player-to-player communications, sharing detailed knowledge of games and play strategies, the ability to read diverse gameplay styles, and being a selfless teammate are valued competencies of the collaborative, "hardcore" player. Indeed, these players value these competencies especially now that gaming is a mainstream phenomenon. As Rooster noted of video gaming with a distinct

[122] KDR stands for "kill-death ratio," and is a common shorthand metric by which gamers judge their performance in multiplayer shooter games.

tone of derision, "*Everybody* does it." The influx of new players to LANopolis and to online gaming spaces have underscored the need for these avid gamers to surround themselves physically (in the LAN) and virtually with like-minded players who are willing to foster close-knit communities of practice. These gamers build their gaming capital as a virtual band of brothers to keep the dregs of multiplayer shooters at bay (players that O'Brien colorfully referred to as, "all your assholes, dicks, and pussies").

After playing alongside and speaking with LANopolis' "regulars," it is evident that playing first- and third-person military shooter games is in many ways commensurate with other multiplayer game experiences – both mediated and non-mediated. There are valued rules of play that transcend genres and gaming platforms that speak to shared ideals of social etiquette and public comportment (e.g., not cheating or griefing). There are, however, genre and medium-specific characteristics that make the military shooter gameplay a distinctly charged media experience – textually and contextually. There are the manifold ludic pleasures of war spectacle itself. As Buddy readily admitted: "I like explosions. I like grenades, C4, calling in air strikes, everything…big booms. [Repeating for emphasis] Big booms!" There are also ludic pleasures of *not* seeing the realities of war, and the games' connections to other militainment. David spoke to these points:

> Beyond the obviousness of the fact that playing war will never be like living war … The big differences are – the huge explosions, the plane crashes, chases, tank sequence, infiltrating underground bases – sh*t like that, it's not particularly realistic. It's awesome…and it's fun to be immersed in such a gripping, cinematic event … But it's not realistic.

There are also the pleasures of playing war together. Moreover, because these games are immersive, visceral, and immediate (as opposed to the perspectival and strategic remove

of real time strategy games, for instance), communication, coordination, timing, and ultimately trust become force multipliers in deciding the outcomes of these virtual wars. Working together towards a common purpose in frenetic online firefights also grows gaming capital that strengthens social bonds and the shared sense of player empathy. The "good" ludic soldier is not someone who only fights in the game, but someone who fights across games to forge a stronger community of play (i.e., Chapter Five's "lesson" of ludic collaboration). As David noted: "Being a good gamer [is trying to] consolidate the community, for whatever game or genre you're playing in. It's not necessarily your responsibility, but the hallmark of a good gamer is someone who sees [novice gamers] and will help them out, and coach them…it's something that comes with experience." O'Brien agreed with David, but thought "good gaming" is more rudimentary still, saying: "Having a good attitude and being a good citizen – if everyone around you is doing the same thing – is going to result to the most fun experience for everyone." Being a competent, selfless gamer enables the communicative team to dominate in the game and protect themselves from the "discourse of domination" that pervades these online venues, even when they are the ones engaging in this behavior (see, Chapter Five).[123] David

[123] The gamers did not discuss the ethics of actions conducted within the games' single-player, narrative campaigns. I do not want to speculate too far on this point, but it is likely that because players are acutely aware of playing with others versus playing alone, that the "patriotic" sacrifices conducted in the single-player campaigns are equivalent to playing a role for narrative cohesion. The actions in multiplayer sessions with other humans, however, can contribute potentially to a richer sense of community and are thus are held in higher esteem than actions undertaken when nobody is watching. Sacrificial citizenship makes sense as a concept in a narrative setting; it makes less sense – as a concept and in practice – for multiplayer games.

spoke to these interrelated points, saying: "[It] helps to plant the seed, of really working as a cooperative gamer, as a community, as a single unit…the community also [offsets the feeling] when you get [insulted] by a twelve year old raggin' about your mom, or whatever." As we will see next chapter, the hardcore gaming practices popularized in venues like LANopolis have begat the professionalization of the ludic soldier, with the gamer's cultural capital having since been transformed into financial capital.

CONCLUSION

The Ludification of War Culture

> "Army of One"
>
> -- The U.S. Army's recruiting slogan, 2001-2006

> Pwn (verb): "Pronunciation: (pôn). Originally a misspelling of the word "own" as in to totally have a skillful advantage over someone or something. Pwn is to more than just own; to pwn."
>
> -- From Urban Dictionary.com

AN ARMY OF PWN

I parked a few blocks from the Dallas Convention Center and began making my way towards the massive complex. Unsure of which way to go exactly, I shadowed a group of teenage boys who looked like they might be gamers. My instincts proved right. As we neared the public park adjacent to the convention center, our group merged with other young men and teens who were here to watch and, in many cases, compete in Major League Gaming's (MLG) 2011 inaugural pro-circuit event. This Sunday was the third and final day of the opening weekend's competition and, like the thousands of other gamer-attendees, I too was eager to see which players and teams would prevail in the real-time strategy game *StarCraft 2*, the sci-fi FPS *Halo: Reach*, and the military shooter *Call of Duty: Black Ops* – the event's three sanctioned tournament games. The MLG is LANopolis (Chapters Five and Six) on proverbial steroids. Instead of facilitating networked gameplay for dozens of players, this space accommodates hundreds of gamers. There is another key difference – here, the gamers play for money.

The screen-filled convention space hosts three main areas. The first section houses the sponsors' kiosks and booths. Gaming hardware companies like Alienware, Astro, and Sony invite attendees to demo their newest wares and games, while snack and refreshment companies like War Heads candy, Stride gum, Nos energy drink, and Dr. Pepper distribute free samples of their sugary goods. The room's middle section contains rows upon rows of networked PCs and game consoles that have been linked for competitive play. The MLG's red-shirted officials and on-lookers watch from pedestrian aisles as gamers compete to ascend through the tournament standings. And the room's final section along the back wall features three main stages. Here, hundreds of gamers cheer as the nation's best players compete for thousands of dollars in prize money and league sponsorship. The large projection screens display the players' adroit skills and feature sports-style broadcast commentators who preview the game levels (not unlike animated golf announcers describing a given hole's challenges), and who offer their insights on the kinetic, martial gameplay.

Figures 7.1 and 7.2: A crowd watches as gamers compete in the 2011 MLG event in Dallas, TX

Figures 7.3 and 7.4: Professional gamers play in teams (L), while announcers narrate play-by-play commentary for online spectators (R)

I begin the Conclusion with this brief description of a nascent but growing electronic sport league's commodification of video gameplay because it offers a dramatic counter example to the *Invaders!* art installation described in the Introduction. These antithetical bookends showcase the vast spectrum of affective states and experiences that video war games might engender, and how these titles, their play communities, and their associated interests – from the artistic to the corporate – have and might yet be co-opted for dissimilar ends. On the one hand, military shooters and other popular combat games enjoy such intense fanfare that the amateur tournaments that were once hosted in gamers' homes have given way to professional gaming associations looking to "monetize" the ludic war experience by codifying its rules of play and transforming the experience into a spectator sport.[124] On the other hand, there are *Invaders!* and similarly sympathetic interventions that critique virtual combat's pleasures by foregrounding the titles' design mechanics and by injecting uncomfortable political realities into their escapist realms.

[124] The MLG is not the only professional gaming league in existence, though it is almost certainly the largest.

The through-line that unites these dissimilar endeavors – from organized e-sporting competitions, to anti-war art pieces, and all the commercially successful and failed war game productions in between – are the hegemonic pleasures of ludic war play. Recall that one of the initial questions that set this project in motion is: why do military shooters succeed in the marketplace at a moment when most militainment fail? As I have argued throughout, it is the shooter's unique gameplay modality – the interplay between the titles' textual designs (text), the adverting ephemera's discourse (paratext), and the avid gamers' social practices (context) – that makes these games such a commercially viable and reliable militainment format.

This project has endeavored to interpret the video game critically as an apparatus that contains its own medium-specific textual interactions, and one that interacts uniquely within broader economic and cultural fields. I started with the simple precept that gameplay matters because it affords us the experiential license and technological means to experiment with our choices, our futures, and even ourselves. Culture is an impossibly messy thing, and I have endeavored to capture in the preceding chapters' case studies emblematic moments of post-9/11 military shooter gameplay, and to make sense of their associated play cultures; I have tried to be empirical without being overly empiricist.

To review then, I have argued that understanding the "media modality" of video games illuminates the manner in which these texts are, first, thought to correspond to reality (or not), and second, possess medium-specific traits as expressive and communicative vehicles that facilitate states of play. Modality is a generative term for arriving at a historicized cultural and political economic analysis of media pleasures

because it highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between the discursive aspects of media (modality as context), and gaming's specific machinations as an interactive apparatus (modality as text). The second half of Chapter One compares two military shooters produced decades apart to demonstrate the manifold ways that gaming's ludic wars have changed over time, while pointing to those aesthetic structures of form that endure – namely, immersion, agency, and transformation (Murray, 1997). It is an admittedly limited snapshot comparison, but one that I hope makes clear the utility of media modality as a diachronic tool for critical game analysis.

Chapters Two and Three bring modality to bear on the best-selling *Modern Warfare* and Tom Clancy shooters. These games make pleasurable the gamer's inhabitation of multiple soldier characters who commit patriotic sacrifices (Chapter Two), and showcase in dramatic fashion the potent efficacy of future technologies and battlefield tactics to guarantee the political promises of American exceptionalism after 9/11 (Chapter Three). Textually, these games accomplish these feats by emphasizing different elements of gameplay. The changing avatar identities in the *Modern Warfare* games promote an immersive narrative subjectivity that creates an empathetic bond between the stories' characters and the player. And the Clancy-brand shooters' meticulous modeling of battlefield tactics and space (in *Rainbow Six: Vegas*), and its depiction of its cybernetic soldiers (in *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*), demonstrate procedurally that America possesses the technology and the political will to, if necessary, engage in preemptive but nevertheless righteous war. These series are additionally

pleasurable because they connect contextually with the imagery and themes of war reportage, and with an established militainment brand known for its exciting action.

Examining ludic war's gameplay pleasures, even when those pleasures are understood as the dynamic product of formal computational designs and the game's connection to the real, will only take a critical analysis so far. Fortunately, modality's utility as a novel, analytic concept is not bound to the close readings of text alone. Questions of modality can (and, indeed, should) be applied to gaming ephemera, and interview protocols for researching players' ludic pleasures. For this reason, the project's latter chapters assess shooters' strategic marketing efforts, and how avid gamers engage with one another through these games in their raucous multiplayer sessions. Chapter Four explains the balancing act that video game producers and marketers engage in when selling the ludic war experience to a world at war. In particular, this chapter explores the advertising strategies Activision pursued to appeal to dissimilar game-buying constituencies and pre-frame *Call of Duty 4 Modern Warfare* to avoid the backlash of moral panics. Successfully advertising the ludic war experience demands that marketers rhetorically construct a considerably delimited notion of "military realism" so gamers can play their virtual wars with the assurance that war's grim realities will not short-circuit their pleasurable gameplay fictions.

In Chapter Five, I describe my personal experiences and the gameplay lessons I learned while playing alongside avid gamers at LANopolis, a popular computer gaming center. The competitions that military shooters facilitate color significantly the rules of social comportment and shared knowledges and values that gain expressions during the

all-night play sessions in this computer gaming center. When LANopolis' avid gamers discuss what they enjoy most about military shooters and their cooperative gameplay community, they reflect on the play practices that they engage in to maintain their "hardcore" gamer identities, and the traits they look for in other gamers (Chapter Six). These hardcore gamers are keenly aware of the complexities of enjoying war games during a time of international strife, and share their thoughts on how they negotiate ludic war play's complex liminality. Together, these textual, paratextual, and contextual practices bring the ludic war formation into being, capitalizing on medium-specific pleasures that other War on Terror militainment fail to produce.

THE LUDIFICATION OF WAR CULTURE

This is the point at which we can finally return to Raymond Williams' "structure of feeling" concept first invoked in the Introduction. Again, Williams' elusive but analytically and methodologically provocative cultural hypothesis concerns how experiential processes and events are broadly felt, and why these widely held but historically specific feelings are integrally *and* necessarily connected to society's interlocking social apparatuses and values. Or, to update Williams' phrasing in light of this project's concerns and discoveries: the ludic war experience articulates *an interactive structure of pleasure* that enables American consumers to pleasurably take up virtual arms against enemies of the state during times of international crises.

But the interactive structure of pleasure is more than a multifaceted techno-cultural apparatus that connects with and produces pleasurable textual and contextual gameplay experiences that speak to post-9/11 anxieties – it likewise makes available to

consumers a form of emergent ludic citizenship that, on the one hand, reflects the prevailing mode of postmodern warfighting and, on the other, the thoroughgoing economic imperatives of late capitalism. Critical political economist Dallas Smythe proposed the idea of the "audience commodity" to describe the way that media users, especially television audiences, were bundled and delivered by broadcasters to advertisers as veritable commodities. Ludic war's affecting structure of feeling accomplishes a similar though less systematic feat by creating an engagine political subjectivity that interpellates and coaches gamers on how to be good consumers and virtual soldiers. If Smythe's audience commodity delivers viewers to advertisers, then ludic war's interactive apparatus – especially those popular games developed after 9/11 – delivers gamers to the interests of the military-entertainment complex. These virtual soldiers are not necessarily more susceptible to defense interests, but they are directly subjected to the soft power and defense ideologies that these expertly crafted entertainment properties wield. Future research should pursue this line of audience inquiry to see if and to what extent avid military-themed video gamers trust and internalize the stories and values that American militainment propagate.

In addition to their affective elements (their near-future, "ticking time bomb" narratives, immersive perspectives, navigable storymaps, etc.), post-9/11 shooters are compelling experiences for many because they enjoy an epistemological credibility borne out of the video game's basic computational form. In his summary of play's competing conceptual frameworks, Jonathan Dovey (2006) discusses the power of simulation to establish certain truth claims:

> If each historical age has its own ways of producing truth about the world, then probability can be seen as the root of contemporary epistemology. This epistemology is at its most obvious in the use of simulation as a way of producing knowledge. Contemporary ludic culture produces simulation as a ground of knowledge just as 19th century capitalism was based upon observational empiricism. The simulation operates in the subjunctive mode of 'If this (action/event/behavior) then what are the chances of that (reaction)'. Moreover a simulation and a game are remarkably similar processes, they are both dynamic rule bound systems according to whose terms we agree to let a model stand in for, or become, reality. Simulation emerges as the knowledge mechanism for ludic culture. (p. 136)

This book has endeavored to connect identity, technology, and play practices across its case studies because gaming's simulation-based processes shape our understanding of the world around us, the cultural mythologies that color those experiences, and ultimately, notions of the self. The "playful identity"[125] at the core of military shooters is the identity of the ludic soldier. But while ludic war's interactive structure of pleasure is integral to the creation of the shooter's pleasures and the cultivation of its core martial identity, the cultural and epistemological logic of this combative play identity and its attendant political mythology are not restricted to games alone. The video game form and the shooter genre have spread this ludic subject position to other militainment texts, to non-game technological platforms, and even to non-play spaces. That is, instead of postmodern war production logics and older military entertainment exercising a single-directional influence on the content, design, and media modality of shooters, it is worth thinking in these few remaining pages about the ways these shooters have, in turn, shaped popular culture by increasing opportunities for citizen-soldiers to become ludic soldiers,

[125] See, for example, Raessens' "playful identities" project where he and his collaborators examine the reflexive construction of identity through different interactive technologies (http://www.playful-identities.nl).

or how the modern state has changed from hailing its subjects with war spectacle, to how it hails its citizenry with opportunities for war play. Turning our attention at this late juncture to the broader "ludification" of post-9/11 war culture has the added benefit of widening the analysis beyond gaming culture proper to assess the diffuse but related practices by which the twentieth-century citizen-soldier is transforming into the twenty-first century ludic soldier.[126] The following examples are illustrative, not exhaustive.

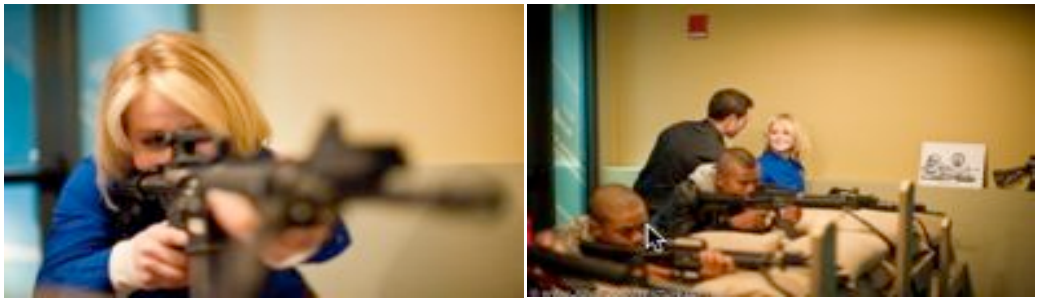
As I discovered during my trip to Dallas, today's ludic soldiers compete shoulder-to-shoulder in the MLG's screen-filled trenches, where their firefights are commoditized as spectator sport. The ludic soldier subjectivity is also an adoptable identity at the U.S. military's "Virtual Army Experience" where would-be recruits can sign up to "play Army" at this traveling road show (see, "Introduction" in Huntemann & Payne, 2009).

Figures 7.5 and 7.6: Attendees line up to try their hand at virtual war at the traveling "Virtual Army Experience"[127]

[126] Roger Stahl's work (2010) is valuable *precisely* because it demonstrates how the reigning military mythology is not just a ludic affair. With that in mind, this project maintains that shooters offer the clearest articulation of the how the military and its citizenry are imagined in popular culture, and why they are envisioned thusly.

[127] Images: "http://profchristy.typepad.com/.a/6a00d83495e9d569e20120a6007331970b-800wi" and "http://0.tqn.com/d/phoenix/1/0/E/d/2/virtualarmy02.jpg"

And the ludic soldier identity can be purchased by the virtual round at the National Infantry Museum in Columbus, Georgia where visitors take their best shot on the "Engagement Skills Trainer" – the same rifle simulator used at Ft. Benning (FYI: $7 for 30 rounds, or $10 for 60 rounds of burst fire). In a space that is otherwise dedicated to memorializing America's frontline warfighters, museum-goers can vicariously adopt the soldier's identity by assuming their weaponized view. Of course, looking down the barrel of these modified weapons is only the physical analog of the virtual experiences that first-person shooter video games have been trading in for decades.



Figures 7.7 and 7.8: National Infantry Museum visitors take their best shot on the "Engagement Skills Trainer"[128]

The ludic soldier subject position is thus a flexible and multifarious identity position, but one that uniquely expresses the broader ludification of culture[129] – be it as

[128] Images from: http://www.nationalinfantrymuseum.com/?page_id=1297

[129] Following the lead of Joost Raessens (2005), I prefer the admittedly clunky "ludification" to the no less awkward term "gamification" because the former suggests how the play spirit is thoroughly imbricated in the everyday practices of cultural production and consumption thanks to a spate of digital communication and information technologies and a vibrant participatory culture (points covered in the Introduction). "Gamification," meanwhile, is the act of introducing rules and scoring systems to non-game activities as a motivational prompt (see, Jane McGonigal's *Reality Is Broken: Why*

for-profit sport, as an immersive recruitment road show, or as codified memory in a museum space. It is likewise a new media identity that maintains ontological roots to its citizen-soldier antecedent, and technological roots to the video game's cultural and control logics. The implication is that even if one never picks up a joystick to play a military shooter, or a virtual assault rifle in a museum or at a recruitment event, the ludic soldier identity and its attendant nationalistic pleasures inform gamers and non-gamers alike about the U.S.'s political promise and military might in the new century, and the role that play and fantasy have in mediating the citizen's relationship to the nation.

The ludification of culture also reminds us that the affective pleasures of playing games are inextricably linked to the participatory nature of immersion, agency, and transformation (Murray, 1997) – elements that make multiple demands of the player, including a call *to action*. This is one of the primary reasons why the project has focused broadly on studying textual, paratextual, and contextual practices, and how these actions gain their cultural meaningfulness and currency when their textual and contextual modalities intersect. Games scholar Joost Raessens supports this complex view of gaming, stating: "Computer games are not just a game, never just a business strategy for maximizing profit, but always also a *battlefield* where the possibility to realize specific,

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Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World [2011] for a popularization of this term). In other words, ludification is about media culture's increasingly playful processes of being, whereas gamification is applied design; one is about ontology and identity, the other hands-on praxis. This is an admittedly generous handling of gamification, which some argue represents nothing more than advanced marketing techniques that exploit gaming's reward systems while abandoning any procedural rules and mechanics that might draw attention to processes operations (Bogost, 2011, n.p.); i.e., gamification is really "pointification" (Robertson, 2010, n.p.).

bottom-up, heterogeneous forms of participatory media culture is at stake" (emphasis added, 2005, pp. 383-384). Be they about war or not, all games are proverbial "battlefields" because games are always already culture. And culture is a contested site. Or, in gaming's parlance, culture is a site of contest.

One of the persistent challenges of working on a project like this has been the question of where to begin and where to end, and deciding which sites of contest and activities deserve attention from those that must be set aside. The project's multi-methodological design, numerous objects and sites of study, and overall goal of tracking something as amorphous as "gaming culture" complicate considerably the task of assessing systematically how professional and recreational media practices fit together (or do not), and suturing those findings into a compelling, analytic whole. There are unquestionably other tacks one could have pursued to assess the pleasures of military shooters, including choosing different games, interrogating different sites of play, assessing different paratextual ephemera, and so forth. One could have also selected different historical endpoints. The titles and gaming moments I study occur between the 9/11 attacks and the death of al-Qaeda's founder and leader Osama bin Laden. The question of appropriate periodization is a consequential one for historians, but this project's historical bracketing is one of convenience. I am less interested in the question of periodizing gameplay, and wish instead to focus first on unpacking these popular playthings (which can *then* be connected to a historical moment). If we are searching for metaphors, we might think of video games as modern day palimpsests, as interactive records that represent layers upon layers of creative practices, and that contain – like the

faint and hidden writing on ancient parchment – earlier iterations of code, game mechanics, and cultural mythologies.

This study, which has focused on the manifold pleasures and affective hold of military shooters, has to a lesser extent also been a study of mythology. Following Raymond Williams' lead, my study has endeavored to connect the concerns of cultural studies with that of critical political economy by way of video games' practices – hoping to help move game studies beyond formalistic accounts about how the form functions, or simplistic critical accounts that disregard player pleasure as another yet instance of false consciousness. There is, I believe, an interlocking apparatus of actions that determine the kinds of pleasures that these games attempt to engender for players during a time of war. (Williams provided the theoretical framework; I filled it in with a grounded account).

The interactive structure of pleasure that makes ludic war fun at a time of international strife also perpetuates a distinct mythology about the nation-state. In the case of commercially popular post-9/11 military shooters produced in the West, this mythology is more often than not about America's promises and challenges in the new century. I have argued media modality's utility for thinking about the meaningfulness of video games because its careful investigation discloses the ways interactive fictions reveal all-too-real truths about prevailing cultural mythologies. Vincent Mosco (2004) tells us that, "To understand a myth involves more than proving it false. It means figuring out why the myth exists, why it is so important to people, what it means, and what it tells us about people's hopes and dreams" (p. 29). Games are powerful vessels for the exploration of national (and nationalistic) myths because they make us the centerpiece

of that experience: we are the ludic soldier who is the bulwark against the outside terroristic forces; we are the engine, driving the game's narrative and witnessing firsthand the consequences of our choices. In these moments, we do more than reflect on battlefield strategies, we reflect on our hopes and dreams. These political and personal aspirations are amplified because they come into direct conflict with – as is often the case for the post-9/11 military shooters – our collective nightmares (recall one's multiple deaths in *Modern Warfare*, or the terrorized residential spaces of the Clancy shooters).

It took the U.S. military roughly ten years after the attacks of September 11 to find and kill its "public enemy #1." It took ludic war culture less than a week to recreate Osama bin Laden's assassination. On May 2, 2011, a team of Navy SEALs assassinated bin Laden who had been hiding, perhaps for years, in a large compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Five days later, this infamous residence had been transformed into a downloadable level for the popular multiplayer first-person shooter game *Counter-Strike* (Fletch, 2011, n.p.). At the same time, the game studio behind *Kuma\War*, an online game firm which had been publishing levels based on the after-action reports of soldiers fighting in Iraq, published its final level – "The Death of Osama bin Laden." This free-to-play level offers gamers a narrative conclusion to the company's digitized War on Terror series (Kuma War, 2011, n.p.). Soon thereafter, SEAL Team Six – the military operatives responsible for storming the Abbottabad safe house – made an appearance in the initial marketing materials for Activision's *Modern Warfare 3* (the previously non-existent game that was mocked by *The Onion* in Chapter Four) (Totilo, 2011, n.p.). And less than three weeks after the death of al-Qaeda's leader, defense contractor Raytheon

and Motion Reality crafted an immersive 3D simulation of the raid to demo at the 2011 Special Operations Forces Industry Conference (Ackerman, 2011, n.p.).

The timeliness of these responses is remarkable, but not unprecedented. Gamer culture had, after all, produced and circulated a wealth of "kill bin Laden" games after the September 11 attacks (Lowood, 2008). What is perhaps notable about the relationship between bin Laden and video games this time around is the speed with which his death was commodified. Osama bin Laden's assassination was an invitation for nationalistic grandstanding (with cable news channels broadcasting Americans chanting "U.S.A., U.S.A.!" in city streets), and it quickly became a ready-made opportunity to capitalize on the conclusion to the War on Terror "story."

But this event – celebrated and commercialized as it was – is clearly a convenient narrative bookend. Neither the U.S.'s War on Terror nor the entertainment industry's ludic wars will end with bin Laden's death. Indeed, as textured a historical snapshot of cultural anxieties as post-9/11 military shooters showcase, video games are equally about the future. This point cannot be underestimated, and it is not a glib truism: it is an essential quality of the medium's form. These playthings entice gamers into projecting their wills into their spaces and stories to shape those events that have not yet obtained – be they aligning *Tetris*' falling, interlocking blocks, or saving the U.S. from foreign forces in any number of military shooters. Unlike the textual apparatuses of other entertainment media, the "game gaze" of the ludic apparatus is always about looking towards future possibilities and states of being (Atkins, 2006). The political promise of video games lies in the form's ability to provoke gamers into playing with the present

while keeping an eye to the future, so that we might understand the world as it is currently imagined, and imagine the world as it might be.

Appendix A

DEFINING THE "MILITARY-ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX"

When critics, scholars, and pundits invoke the term, the "military-entertainment complex," they are generally referring to the commercial and non-commercial collaborations between the military sector and its defense firms, and the entertainment industry and its media companies. These professional collaborations result in wide-ranging artifacts – from Hollywood films, to "serious games" for military training, to computer-based war modeling software, to theme park rides, to TV programming about war and the armed forces. The sheer variety of entertainment goods that find their origins somewhere in this matrix complicate efforts to produce an easy roadmap of this production network, especially when compared to the hyphenate from which it is derived. President Eisenhower's better-known military-industrial complex (sometimes referred to as the "iron triangle"), which describes the nexus of power and influence between defense contractors, the military, and congressional lawmakers following WWII, became a prime target for criticism and scholarship when its power was most evident during the height of the Vietnam War (although defense spending itself peaked during the Cold War under Regan's leadership in 1986 [Roland, 2001, p. 47]). By contrast, the military-entertainment complex is a post-Cold War phenomenon that has considerably more opaque linkages between its numerous constituents. The reason for the complex's increased opacity as an object of study is at least three-fold: first, there are wide-ranging connections between military interests and everyday objects that are not easily read as

military goods *per se* (see, Turse [2008] for an exhaustive list of these common goods); second, because many of these products are cultural and entertainment wares (and are not literally weapons systems), they exercise consensual and not coercive power[130]; and third, this production matrix reflects broader shifts in how the military operates and conducts war (i.e., the shift from total war to postmodern war), and should be understood as a realignment of procurement and combat policies rather than a total break with the past.

Academics and critics have commented on the complexity of the military-entertainment complex from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. For instance, Nick Turse (2008) offers the most inclusive and comprehensive (if excessive) hyphenate, calling it the "military-industrial-technological-entertainment-academic-scientific-media-intelligence-homland security-surveillance-national security-corporate complex" (p. 16). For sake of ease, Turse refers to the condition simply as "the complex." Turse's work details the Department of Defense's innumerable connections to the corporations that produce, among others, everyday consumer goods (e.g., Procter & Gamble, General Mills, PepsiCo), oil and oil-derived products (e.g., Chevron, BP, Haliburton), and, of course, entertainment wares (e.g., Tom Clancy trans-media properties, Microsoft, NASCAR). The following 2008 figures speak to the complex's staggering level of economic activity: defense spending approximates a $555 billion annual layout; the U.S. toy industry rakes in $22 billion a year; video game software and hardware sales now exceed 12.5 billion; and PC Games alone account for $1 billion worth of sales (Turse,

[130] I am adopting Antonio Gramsci's (1971) differentiation in hegemony theory between consent and coercion in this instance. Similarly, Joseph Nye (2004) argues that these goods exercise a kind of "soft power."

2008, p. 140). Because Turse's journalistic account offers only an introduction to how video games significantly contribute to the constitution of the military-entertainment complex, we should look to other critics.

History of science and technology scholar Timothy Lenoir has arguably written the most detailed studies regarding the human and technological linkages between video game firms and defense contractors. Lenoir argues that simulation technologies are paving the way for a "posthuman" future (2000), and that video games have constituted a critical juncture in, if not the paradigmatic form of, the military-entertainment complex (2002-2003). And Lenoir is not alone in this view. In *Virtuous War* (2001) James Der Derian labels the complex the "Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network" (or MIME-Net), and contends that video games help facilitate "virtuous war" – or the global violence that comes from placing "technology in the service of virtue" – permitting assaults to be waged from increasingly vast distances (p. xi). "At the heart of virtuous war is the technical capability and ethical imperative to threaten and, if necessary, actualize violence from a distance – with no or minimal casualties" (p. xv). Increasingly impersonal and hyper-mediated interactions (video games that look like real military technologies and interfaces, and vice-versa) not only extend the hegemonic reach of digitally advanced nations, but it also conflates simulated deaths with real ones for those soldiers who are asked to kill by pushing a button. Der Derian warns:

> Unlike other forms of warfare, virtuous war has an unsurpassed power to commute death, to keep it out of sight, out of mind. Herein lies its most morally dubious danger. In simulated preparations and virtual executions of war, there is a high risk that one learns how to kill but not take responsibility for it. One experiences "death" but not the tragic consequences of it. In virtuous war we now

> face not just the confusion but the pixilation of war and game on the same screen. (2001, p. xvi)

Building in part on Der Derian's work, Stephen Kline et al. (2003), describe this evolving complex as "the conjunction of advanced military planning, computer simulation, and the simulation-designing expertise of film and video game companies," which is "creating 'a new network of virtual power'" (p. 180). They also see the long history between defense and video game interests as having led to a dominant theme of "militarized masculinity" – "a shared semiotic nexus revolving around issues of war, conquest, and combat" – that has affected much of gaming content across genres, irrespective of whether or not a game has manifest military themes (p. 255).

Stephen Stockwell and Adam Muir (2003), likewise, critique the sharing of resources, ideas, and energy between "computer game producers and the military; … between Hollywood producers and the U.S. government on language and concepts post September 11, 2001; and between the military's propaganda machine and the entertainment industry's thirst for manufactured and timely 'reality'" (p. 2). They agree with Lenoir that the complex's dynamism is due to its flexibility of digital assets and human personnel; meaning, both intellectual property (e.g. gaming algorithms and 3-D engines) and industry researchers and creatives move easily back and forth from defense firms to entertainment companies. Again, this intra-industry migration and fluidity aggravate attempts to chronicle the complex's, well, *complex* configuration and history.

Breaking from the military-entertainment label, cyber-culture scholars David Silver and Alice Marwick (2006) call the convergence of new media with the U.S.'s

militarized state a "dot.mil" condition. For example: "Dot.mil can be seen in the president dressing up as an avatar from a shoot-'em-up computer game. It can be seen in defense contractors rebranding themselves as 'systems integrators' and in dot.bombs morphing corporate strategies from business-to-business software to surveillance applications" (Silver and Marwick, 2006, p. 47).

One final conceptualization worth noting is Les Levidow and Kevin Robins' "military-cybernetic complex," which is a functioning of the "Military Information Society" (1989, p. 163). The authors argue that the pro-military discourse of technological invention promotes a kind of interactive or cybernetic freedom even as current and future technologies promise to exercise more control over their users. The authors' "infotech" concept contains strong echoes of James William Gibson's (1986) "technowar," a failed discourse invoked by the military's technocratic leadership during the Vietnam War.

> Through infotech, military models of reality appeal to widespread illusions of omnipotence, of overcoming human limitations, even as they conceal our relative impotence. Computer-based models of war, work and learning can promote military values, even when they apparently encourage the operator to "think." In all those ways, we are presently headed towards a military information society, which encompasses much more of our lives than we would like to acknowledge. (Levidow and Robins, 1989, p. 159)

Levidow and Robins rightly criticize some social scientists for neglecting the role that war has had on the development of culture and social organization, although the authors do credit Max Weber, Lewis Mumford, Anthony Giddens, and Paul Virilio with making important contributions. The scholastic paucity of work on the topic is not terribly surprising given the topic's opacity, ubiquity, and liminality (though it does present a

relatively untrammeled research area for game studies scholarship). Gameplay is not just elusive in the aforementioned ways, but it is also paradoxical. As Levidow and Robins note about video games in particular:

> "Just look at the child sitting in front of his computer at school," writes Baudrillard (1988). "Do you think he has been made more interactive, opened up to the world? Child and machine have merely been joined together in an integrated circuit." Or, rather, the child's play may have become more interactive, but only in relation to a simulated reality. Thus arises the paradox of regulated play. (Levidow and Robins, 1989, p. 170)

The paradox of video gameplay is the technological manifestation of a much deeper sociological and existential phenomenon – namely the longstanding agency and structure dialectic. The interactive control apparatuses of video games include, as Levidow and Robins say of military-inflected culture generally, their own "attractions as well as their horrors" (1989, p. 176).

Appendix B

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction / Welcome

- Moderator introduction
- Basic guidelines for the group
- Consent sheets completed
- Introduction of participants

I. Warm-up

Mod: We're here today to talk about what makes one a good hardcore gamer in military shooters, the qualities you look for in teammates, and what gameplay elements make for the most enjoyable experiences.

Mod: I'd like to get the ball rolling by (1) asking you all to name one favorite military-themed shooter from the last few years (e.g., *Battlefield, Call of Duty, Metal of Honor, Counter-Strike, Homefront*); and (2) name one memorable moment from that game – it can come from the single-player campaign or a multiplayer session.

Mod: I want to cover three main topics: hardcore gamers, shooter games, and team play.

II. Hardcore Gamers

Mod: Show the *South Park* screen grab.
Mod: What show does this come from? What stereotype is being ridiculed here? (probe) Do you identify with the image from *South Park*? Is it different for players of different genres? For example are MMO or *WoW* players different from FPS players? Why?

Mod: Okay, show of hands: how many here consider yourself to be a "hardcore" gamer? What does this label bring to mind? Good connotations, or bad? (probe).
Mod: What makes one a "hardcore" gamer? (probe) Is it the same thing as a fan? (probe)

III. Military Shooters

Mod: Military shooters are often "under fire," so to speak, for depicting contemporary combat. Does this bother you? Do you seek out or prefer these realistic depictions to more fantastic games like *Crysis*, *Halo*, or *Gears of War*?

Mod: What elements make for a "good" military shooter? (probe) Story? Customization? Online Community? Platform specific games?

IV. Shooter Gameplay Knowledge

Mod: What things should a hardcore military shooter gamer know? (probe) What makes one a "good" gamer in a LAN or online setting?

Mod: How do you make yourself a better player? Help others become better?

Mod: How do you all seek out this information? (probe) Online? Blogs? Clans?

Mod: Do you active on online boards? Create FAQs? Video walk-throughs?

Mod: What have these games taught you about warfare – either contemporary or historical? What about international politics? Bush doctrine of preemptive war? Our wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and air battles in Libya or Yemen.

Mod: What qualities, that we've discussed, makes one an expert FPS gamer?

V. Final thoughts

Mod: We've covered a lot here today … Is there anything else you'd like to share? Anything you want to expand on? (probe)

Mod: Thank you all for your participation.

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